RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

EMERSON AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

BY

J. ARTHUR HILL

Author of "Psychical Investigations"
"Spiritualism: Its History, Phenomena, and Doctrine"
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Preface

When Emerson was in Paris in 1833, he visited the famous cemetery of Père La Chaise. There he came across the tomb of Auguste Colignon, who, said the monument, "lived to do right, and had formed himself to virtue on the Essays of Montaigne." I cannot claim for myself so high an achievement, but I can at least say that I owe to Emerson's Essays, very largely, any virtue (in the wider Biblical and etymological sense) that I may possess. To me, Emerson was the most inspired writer of the nineteenth century. He showed me, more than any other, what man can do and be, and how he may put himself in the way of such inspiration as his capacity permits. And, being so keenly conscious of the help received from him, I want others to try the same source. Hence the present little volume, in the hope that it may be useful as an introduction to the greatest thinker of the transatlantic millions of our race, to whom the

whole world now owes so much for their help in overthrowing military tyranny.

All of us now realise, as never before, how tremendously important it is that the British and their American cousins should be united in unbreakable amity. Together, they can almost (or quite) secure the peace of the world, even without help; with the other nations which are joining the League they will be able to secure it beyond doubt, so far as any extensive war is concerned. And the best way of bringing about close friendship is mutual understanding, to which a reading of each other's literature is an important contributory. Americans know English literature, for it is the parent of their own; but the British do not know American literature as they ought. And it seems to me that anything tending to increase this knowledge is entirely good. If my little volume sends a few readers to sit at the feet of America's greatest Prophet, I shall be well content. They will be rivets in the World-Peace, and they may also find much help for their individual souls.

J. A. H.

THORNTON,
BRADFORD,
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Emerson and his Philosophy

CHAPTER I.

Biography.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25th, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, William Emerson, pastor of the Second Church (Unitarian), died eight years later, leaving his family in straitened circumstances. The five little Emerson boys had one great-coat among them, and their schoolfellows would say: "This is Ralph's day: to-morrow it will be Edward's turn."[1] However, Harvard was somehow made possible, no doubt by much maternal scheming and self-sacrifice, and Emerson graduated in 1821, after an undistinguished college career, having been a hopeless failure in mathematics, though winning prizes for composition and speaking. For some time he

[1] *Works*, vol. vi., p. 376. References throughout are to the excellent and authoritative Centenary Edition (12 vols.) of Messrs. Houghton Mifflin Co., but in quoting from an essay I give its title, so that it can easily be looked up in other editions such as the cheap and handy one—in 5 vols.—in Messrs. Dent's "Everyman" Library.

assisted his elder brother William in a school for young ladies in Boston, but studied meanwhile for the ministry. At the age of twenty-six he became co-pastor with Mr. Henry Ware at the Second Church, taking full duty only a few weeks later, when his senior's health failed; but he resigned at the end of four years, the reason being a point of difficulty concerning ritual. In its concrete form, the sacramental rite was distasteful to him, and he wished to see it either abolished or converted into a purely spiritual act by dispensing with the material elements. The people of his church were not prepared to accept either of these revolutionary suggestions, and though on other counts they wished to retain him, and though he on his part had no desire to leave them, it became clear that no compromise was possible, and that his resignation was the only solution. For some time he continued to wear clerical dress, preaching, indeed, to a small congregation at East Lexington; but with his severance from the Second Church at Boston his clerical period may be said to have ended. Henceforward he was to be known more as lecturer and writer than as preacher.

On December 25th, 1832—a few months after his retirement from the Second Church pastorate—Emerson set out on a tour which in those days must have seemed a great undertaking. He wished to see and speak with those leaders of English thought whose writings had influenced him. Being now free from pastoral ties, and moreover needing change to turn his mind from grief—for his wife had died (February, 1831), after only a year and a half of married life—he found himself free

to go in search of intellectual kin.[1] Sailing on Christmas day in the brig *Jasper*, laden with West Indian produce, he reached Malta on February 2nd. From Malta he crossed to Sicily and Syracuse; thence to Rome and Florence, where he met Landor; then to Venice, Geneva, and Paris, and thus to London, where he met J. S. Mill and Coleridge. The last-named inveighed against Unitarianism: Emerson remarked that he himself was a Unitarian: "Yes," said Coleridge, "I supposed so."

From London, the traveller went north, *via* York, in search of the man whose articles in *Fràser's Magazine* had greatly impressed him, and who was destined soon to take literary England by storm. After some difficulty, he found the solitary hill-top where the "lonely scholar nourished his mighty heart," and stayed there as guest one night. This visit to Carlyle is described by Emerson in *English Traits;* but there is no mention of J. S. Mill, who—as Froude tells us—supplied him with a letter of introduction. Probably the logician and the transcendentalist did not think much of each other. And it was probably fortunate that Emerson did not stay long at Craigenputtock; for Carlyle and he were temperamentally very different from each other. To the Scotchman's grim and stormy soul, serenity and contemplativeness seemed like vacuity and laziness. Accordingly—later on—Emerson was dubbed "a gymnosophist sitting on a flowery

[1] Dr. Holmes gives February, 1832, as the date of Mrs. Emerson's death, but this is evidently a mistake. (*Life of Emerson*, p. 56.)

bank." Before leaving Liverpool, he visited Edinburgh, preaching in the Unitarian church of that city, and afterwards paying a visit to Wordsworth, whose personality disappointed him. The poet was narrow-minded and ludicrously egotistic, and when he proceeded to declaim some of his own lines, Emerson—he himself tells us—was "near to laugh."

Arrived home (after a voyage of thirty-five days, for the first steam-boat was still five years below the horizon) Emerson found himself in request both for pulpit and platform. But his theological position did not permit a regular pastorate, and he became more and more of a lecturer. His first subjects were scientific; but he soon found his true *métier* in the fields of literature and mystical religion. A course of biographical lectures in Boston, on Michael Angelo, Luther, Milton, George Fox, and Burke; a course of ten lectures in the same town, on English literature; the slow composition of the tract *Nature;* the editing of *Sartor* for Carlyle; and frequent preaching at Lexington,—these occupied Emerson's time until 1836, when *Nature* was published. With the appearance of this magnificent essay—which, however, aroused little immediate attention and of which only five hundred copies sold in twelve years—Emerson may be said to have definitely taken upon himself the mantle of prophet and teacher. And from this time forth he was recognized as the greatest literary man, the most original and most influential thinker, of the American continent. He had married again in 1835, and had set up house at Concord—a town founded and named by his ancestor Edward

Bulkeley, about 1640—where he lived for the remainder of his life, writing during the summer and reading lectures during the winter, to Lyceum and other audiences throughout the Eastern States. This was how he made his living—and it was not a fat one. A course of ten lectures which had taken months to prepare might bring in $500 in Boston, but the county lyceums could only afford $10 a lecture, with expenses. Once he had the offer of a remunerative engagement for an evening which was already filled. He went to O. W. Holmes and asked him if he could take the lower-paying job off his hands, but unfortunately Holmes himself had an engagement for that evening. "Well, well!" said Emerson, "I shall have to do without that new stove."

In 1842 he took over the editorship of *The Dial*, in place of Margaret Fuller, who had been editor since its inception in 1840. He contributed to it over thirty articles in prose and verse: other contributors were Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Alcott, and Thoreau, but the magazine died of superiority to its public in 1844, and Emerson lost several hundred dollars, for he was its banker as well as its editor. In this year also he suffered a far greater loss in the death of his son Waldo, at five years of age.

In October, 1847, he sailed for Liverpool to fulfil lecturing engagements, chiefly in the northern Mechanics' Institutes. He went straight from Liverpool to Chelsea, and spent a week with Carlyle, then north again to lecture in Manchester, where he had large audiences to hear some of the "Representative Men" readings. Those on

Napoleon and Shakespeare were given later on, in Exeter Hall, London. In February he gave four lectures in Edinburgh, then six in London. He had an audience of a thousand people to hear the lecture on Montaigne. Everywhere he was received with enthusiasm. Several volumes of his Essays had appeared in England, also a volume of poems (in 1847), and Carlyle had done his best to introduce his friend's writings to those capable of appreciation. Consequently he found a public ready for him, and the lectures had a great effect in stimulating interest in the best literature. He spent a few days with Miss Martineau at Rydal Mount, and in London he met many celebrities—Macaulay, Tennyson, Hallam, Milman, Dickens, Arnold, Faraday, Leigh Hunt, Lyell. He made friends with Arthur Hugh Clough at Oxford, and spent a week with him in Paris, though warned against going, Paris being then in the throes of revolution. In autumn, 1848, he returned home and began working up the material gathered for *English Traits*.

In the eighteen-fifties he took a fairly prominent part in the anti-slavery movement. John Brown visited him, but he was not a very vigorous abolitionist until roused by the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it felonious to succour an escaped slave. Then he spoke out with vigour. It was the "duty of every gentleman to break the law."

In 1866 he wrote *Terminus*, his last poem, and evidently felt his powers failing. In July, 1872, the accidental burning of his house caused shock and illness. Eleven thousand dollars were subscribed by the public, and conveyed to him with tact and delicacy. "The list of my benefactors,"

he said, " cannot be read with dry eyes or pronounced with articulate voice. I ought to be in high health to meet such a call on heart and mind, and not the thoughtless invalid I happen to be at present."[1] In October, 1872, he left America to pass the winter in Italy and on the Nile with his daughter. He also spent a few weeks in Paris and a month in London, seeing Carlyle and other friends. Returning in May, 1873, he found that his fellow-townsmen had built and furnished a new house for him. Here he lived happily among books and friends, but with no power of work, his memory being almost gone. In 1874 he was nominated for the Lord Rectorship of Glasgow University, but was beaten by Disraeli. He still occasionally gave a reading, even going as far as Richmond in 1876, to speak before the University of Virginia, being unwilling to refuse an invitation which seemed like an overture of reconciliation to the North. On April 27th, 1882, he died of pneumonia.

A remarkable number of great men died about this time. Carlyle had gone to his rest in February, 1881, Lord Beaconsfield in April, Longfellow in February, 1882, Rossetti and Darwin in April. Emerson had attended Longfellow's funeral, making the pathetic and often-quoted remark: " The gentleman who lies there was a beautiful soul; but I cannot remember his name." Mrs. Emerson survived her husband for twenty years, dying at the age of ninety. His house at Concord is now occupied by friends of the late Miss Emerson.

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[1] Garnett's *Life of Emerson*, p. 181.

The library is kept as in her father's life—Carlyle's portrait on the wall.

Ability and scholarship were hereditary in Emerson, for he came of a long line of cultivated and liberal clergymen. Also there was a strong vein of original genius in the family. It was always considered that Ralph Waldo's younger brother Edward (born 1805) was the most brilliant of the five sons: strikingly handsome, an eloquent speaker, and high-minded in the extreme, he was a general favourite. A poem of his is included in vol. ix. (p. 258) along with *In Memoriam*, Ralph Waldo's tribute to this "brother of the brief but blazing star." Edward was easily first in all his college classes, but his health broke down, a warmer climate was ordered, and he went to Porto Rico, where he died in 1834. Charles was almost equally gifted, but died in 1836. William studied theology in Germany, became heterodox and turned to the law, which he practised successfully. Robert Bulkeley Emerson remained imbecile or at least feeble-minded through life, and it is noteworthy that Edward's brilliant mind gave way temporarily during the early part of his illness. Great wits to madness were ever near allied, as we may admit, without accepting the Nordau theory that genius itself is a disease.

Another relative of very original mind was Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo's aunt, who lived from 1775 to 1863. She was a woman of wide culture, and of eccentric dress and habits. Being erratic and exacting, she was generally seeking a new boarding-house. She often visited her brother's widow and children, exerting over the latter

a great and beneficent influence,—awakening their interest in literature, spurring their ambition, and giving much sound advice and unsparing criticism. Emerson often said that he owed much to this aunt. "Aunt Mary is a genius always new, subtle, frolicsome, musical, unpredictable. . . She is embarrassed by no Moses or Paul, no Angelo or Shakspeare after whose type she is to fashion her speech; her wit is the wild horse of the desert, who snuffs the sirocco and scours the palm-grove without having learned his paces in the Stadium or at Tattersall's."[1] Evidently he had an Emerson precursor in the Self-reliance doctrine! Also in his mystical psychology, for in his *Journal* he notes (1866): "read M. M. E.'s MSS. yesterday many pages. They keep for me the old attraction. . . The central theme of these endless diaries is, her relation to the Divine Being." And again: "Yesterday I read an old file of Aunt Mary's letters, and felt how she still gains by all comparison with later friends."[2] This is high praise, when we remember who those later friends were—the most distinguished group of literary men then living in the world. The grave of this remarkable woman is near that of her nephew, in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Over Emerson's grave there lies a colossal boulder of rose-quartz, fit emblem of his pure and crystalline soul.

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[1] x., p. 597.
[2] *ibid*, p. 601.

CHAPTER II.

Literary Tastes.

A man is known by the company he keeps. He is known still better by the books he reads. Emerson was a wide reader, was indeed one of the most catholic minds of his century, sucking nutriment from Darwin as from à Kempis, from Swedenborg as from Hafiz, and—unlike Coleridge and Wordsworth—he could appreciate *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister ;* but he had strong likes and dislikes, which shed much light on the character of his mind. It is worth while to glance at them.

Emerson's cardinal principle in reading was to follow his own instinct and not to force himself to read what did not appeal to him. With Shakespeare he says (in his essay on Books) :—

> No profit goes where is no pleasure ta'en :
> In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

And he advocated a deliberate restraint, even with favourites. Do not become too much a disciple. Retain your personal integrity :—

> Reading long at one time anything, no matter how it fascinates, destroys thought. . . Do not permit this.

Stop if you find yourself becoming absorbed, at even the first paragraph. Keep yourself out and watch for your impressions.[1]

To the same questioner he said : " Recollect you only read to start your own team ; " and he himself often said that he read only to " make his top spin." After he became famous, he would protest, with a certain shame, against the enthusiasm and hero-worship which he evoked. " If they had read the same things," he would say, " they would think much less of me." No doubt he felt that many of his thoughts, even the most original and inspired ones, were the outcome of reflections which had been initiated by his reading ; and, with characteristic humility, he thought that a course of reading just like his own would make other tops spin just as well as his. His readers will probably think that the material and build of the top count for something, as well as the kind of stimulus that is applied.

But though Emerson seems to slight the value of reading, it is plain that his own range in literature was enormous. In youth particularly he was almost a bookworm, as some lines of his (written about 1835) attest :—

When shall I be tired of reading ?
When the moon is tired of waxing and waning,
When the cloud is tired of raining,
When the sea of ebbing and flowing,

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[1] Woodbury's *Talks with Emerson*, p. 29.

When the grass is weary of growing,
When the planets tire of going,
And when Death is sick of feeding,
Then shall I be tired of reading.[1]

O. W. Holmes once made a list of the references in Emerson's works, and found that they totalled 3,393, the number of different individuals being 868[2]. Shakespeare, Plato, and Napoleon headed the list. Napoleon's name sounds queerly in this connexion, but Emerson had a sort of personal interest in him. When he visited Florida for his health in 1827, he became friendly with a planter, Napoleon Achille Murat, who was the son of no less a person than Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brilliant cavalry leader, who married the Emperor's sister Caroline and was made King of Naples. No doubt this acquaintance was the nearest approach of Emerson to an actual king or ruler; and, however democratic we may be, we should be more than human if we could regard a king's son as *quite* like other men—particularly a king of such romantic history. After Plato, Shakespeare, and Napoleon, came Plutarch, with seventy references.[3] And probably this does not fully represent Emerson's devotion to old Plutarch,—in which he followed Montaigne, another favourite of his—for as a matter of fact his reading was very largely biographical, and Plutarch is the king of that territory. "Read Plutarch, and the world is

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[1] vii., p. 399. (Notes to *Books*.)
[2] viii., p. 403. („ „ *Quotation and Originality*.)
[3] ii., p. 392. („ „ *Self-Reliance*.)

a proud place, peopled with men of positive quality, with heroes and demi-gods standing around us, who will not let us sleep."[1] And in a note to this passage, Dr. Edward Emerson says that his father introduced the following sentence into the lecture as first delivered: "And Plutarch: if the world's library were burning, I should fly to save that, with our Bible and Shakespeare and Plato."[2] It is interesting to remember, in this connexion, the great use that Shakespeare made of Plutarch's *Lives* as sources for his *Julius Cæsar, Antony and Cleopatra, Timon of Athens,* and *Pericles;* also that Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* is about the only book known to have been possessed by him—for there is a copy containing his autograph, in the British Museum. It is of course absurd to compare minds so different as Emerson and Shakespeare, but it is all the more significant to find them rating the same books so high. The fact is, Plutarch and Montaigne are so thoroughly human that they touch all sides of common life; and the greater the mind that reads them, the greater is the admiration and affection evoked.

Of the philosophical classics, Emerson's favourite was Plato. In the essay *Success* he speaks of the healthy youth reading Plato "covered to his chin with a cloak in a cold upper chamber, though he should associate the Dialogues ever after with a woollen smell,"—and this is a piece of exact autobiography.[3] In the essay on Books, he says:

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[1] Essay on *Books,* vii., p. 191.
[2] vii., p. 406; notes to *Books.* x., p. 572, notes to *Plutarch.*
[3] vii., pp. 297, 439 (*Success.*)

"Of Plato I hesitate to speak, lest there should be no end," and in *Works and Days* there is an eloquent passage about reading the *Timæus* in the early dawn, the only proper time—"as of a world just created and still becoming"—for the reading of that book. The Neo-Platonists, also, were favourites with him: Proclus, Jamblicus, Porphyry. These he read for stimulation and for their large strange atmosphere. The reader may obtain "gleams and glimpses of a more excellent illumination from their genius, outvaluing the most distinct information he owes to other books." The grandeur of the starry heavens' impression on us is more valuable than our exact perception of a tub.[1] Of modern philosophers he has little to say, and probably did not read them with either care or interest. He praises Kant, thinking that the transcendentalism of Königsberg supported that of New England; but he has no patience with the logicians. "The highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects is rather the fruit of a sort of moral imagination than of the reasoning machines, such as Locke and Clarke and David Hume."

Fiction of the novel kind he rarely read after his youth, though he always liked *The Bride of Lammermoor* and *Consuelo*![2] He had no pleasure in the contemporary favourites, Dickens and Thackeray, and he alludes to "the poor Pickwick stuff (into which I have only looked and with no

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[1] vii., p. 409. (Notes to *Books*.)

[2] *Journal*, i., p. 72. *Works*, iv., p. 278. In later years he compared *The Bride of Lammermoor* with Aeschylus as "the highest and purest tragedy." (*Journal*, ii., p. 203.)

wish for more) "[1] with a mixture of boredom and contempt. His mind was too fastidious and delicate to appreciate humour of the tap-room kind, either of Dickens or Aristophanes. Thackeray he no doubt found cynical, and of the earth earthy. Emerson had no wish to consort with Becky Sharps. He read to start his own Pegasus, and wanted something to uplift not to depress his mind. Consequently he turned away from the realistic novel which was then in fashion, to the more refreshing and elevated regions of mythology, epic and oriental poetry, and philosophy. It is curious to note, by the way, that he attributes the popularity of *Jane Eyre* to the interest of its moral problem—the rightness or wrongness of setting aside an unsatisfactory marriage and forming other associations according to the impulse of the heart.[2] But surely this is the mistake of a philosopher and moralist, interested chiefly in ideas. Probably the majority of readers of *Jane Eyre* care little for its moral problem. The human interest is the attraction, the personalities of Rochester and Jane, and the development of their love as drawn in what they say and in the minor incidents. It may be called a problem novel, but the problem is not the reason of its popularity.

In poetry, Emerson read omnivorously. Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Chaucer, the Edda, Elizabethan poetry and drama, Wordsworth, Goethe, Saadi,—these are the books which he revelled in. It is

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[1] v., p. 383. (Notes to *Literature*, in *English Traits*.) vii., p. 412. (Notes to *Books*.)

[2] vii., p. 215, *Books*.

noteworthy that he does not mention Virgil in the essay on Books. The Mantuan's melancholy grace must surely have appealed to one of Emerson's cast of mind, but perhaps he found the Latin stateliness a poor substitute for originality and freshness of simple statement. Of Shakespeare he says :—

Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors, as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise ; the others, conceivably. A good reader can, in a sort, nestle into Plato's brain and think from thence ; but not into Shakespeare's. . . He was the farthest reach of subtlety compatible with an individual self. . With this wisdom of life is the equal endowment of imaginative and of lyric power. . . His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see. Our ears are educated to music by his rhythm . . . there is in all cultivated minds a silent appreciation of his superlative power and beauty, which, like Christianity, qualifies the period.[1]

Of Milton he says :—

It is the prerogative of this great man to stand at this hour foremost of all men in literary history, and so (shall we not say ?) of all men, in the power to *inspire*. Virtue goes out of him into others. . . As a poet, Shakespeare undoubtedly transcends, and far surpasses him in his popularity with foreign nations ; but Shakespeare is a voice merely ; who and what he was that sang, that sings, we know not. Milton stands erect, commanding, still visible as a man among men.[2]

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[1] iv., pp. 204, 211. (*Shakespeare.*)
[2] xii., p. 253. (*Milton.*)

Of the modern poets, he ranked Wordsworth as the best since Milton, and knew most of *The Prelude* by heart. The "*Ode on Intimations of Immortality* is the best modern essay on the subject." From Blake he often quoted *The Tiger* with approval, but probably did not care to wrestle with the mystical books. Tennyson he described as "factitious" and "a posture-maker," but admitted that "the colour of the dawn flows over the horizon from his pencil."[1] From Browning he quoted *The Lost Leader*, applying it to Daniel Webster after his defection on the question of slavery. It is pleasant to find that he greatly liked Burns' poem *To the Deil;* evidently he could appreciate Burns' pathetico-whimsical wish that the Devil should get converted and become a respectable member of society.[2] Shelley he did not like:—

When people tell me they do not relish poetry, and bring me Shelley, or Aikin's Poets, or I know not what volumes of rhymed English, to show that it has no charm, I am quite of their mind.[3]

Shelley, though a poetic mind, is never a poet. His muse is uniformly imitative; all his poems composite. A good English scholar he is, with ear, taste and memory; much more, he is a character full of noble and prophetic traits; but imagination, the original, authentic fire of the bard, he has not.[4]

There is an old story of an undergraduate who asked his tutor for a final maxim of good advice,

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[1] Woodbury's *Talks with Emerson*, p. 53.
[2] xii., p. 289. (*Art and Criticism.*)
[3] viii., p. 25. (*Imagination.*)
[4] xii., p. 319. (*Modern Literature.*)

on leaving the University. The don pondered long: then with fervent emphasis said: "My boy, my best counsel is: 'Always verify your quotations!'" Emerson, apparently, was not that undergraduate. His quotations are not always to be relied on. In *Education* he insists on accuracy in small things, but in this one instance he failed to live up to his doctrine. In *Spiritual Laws* he quotes Byron's 'Jack Bunting':—

> He knew not what to say, and so he swore.[1]

But the character in question was Jack Skyscrape, not Bunting—the gentleman of that name, by the way, was Ben and not Jack—and what Byron did say was:—

> Jack was embarrassed,—never hero more,
> And, as he knew not what to say, he swore.[2]

Another instance is referred to by Dr. Holmes. Emerson, in a fine passage about the ship, in *Civilisation*, quotes a couplet:—

> The pulses of her iron heart
> Go beating through the storm,

but gives no reference. Holmes points out that this is apparently an incorrect version of two of his own lines in a poem called *The Steamboat*:—

> The beating of her restless heart
> Still sounding through the storm.[3]

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[1] ii., p. 164.
[2] *Island*, canto iii., 5.
[3] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 251.

And in *Heroism* he quotes :—

> Let them rave,
> Thou art quiet in thy grave,

without reference, and obviously from memory, for though it certainly gives the sense of Tennyson's *Dirge*, with the refrain " Let them rave," the second line is Emerson and not Tennyson.[1]

In allusions, also, as well as quotations, he sometimes tripped,—as indeed what writer does not? In *Art* (vii., p. 42) he says,—pointing out how we make the forces of nature work for us, putting mills by streams or making water expand and contract to run our machinery—that " we do not grind corn or lift the loom by our own strength." It is dangerous for bookish men to wander into other domains. F. W. H. Myers—that wonderful writer and pioneer in psychology—once spoke of a weaver changing the pattern of the cloth by " shifting the loom ! " Apparently neither Emerson nor Myers had ever seen a loom, or they would have known that the weaver neither lifts nor shifts it. And, even if the loom were shifted, it would not in the least degree alter the pattern.

But these are spots in the sun. It is good to take note of them, for the sake of truth and lest an unspotted perfection should too much discourage us : but they are small spots, hardly affecting the light-giving and life-giving power which is what we are mostly concerned with and thankful for.

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[1] Emerson was fond of quoting a line about Love : " All other pleasures are not worth its pains." (*Love*, ii., p. 176.) No source seems discoverable.

CHAPTER III.

Prophet and Philosopher.

But though it is interesting to know what books Emerson read, and though he said that his reading made his top spin, it is arguable that he was more independent of books than almost any writer of his time. He was inspired, in the strict sense of the word. Thoughts came to him, he did not make them. Almost every day he went to the woods to "listen," as he said. The thoughts that came to him were jotted down in his Journal, and woven into lectures afterwards. A certain incoherence is consequently sometimes observable, and unsympathetic critics say that it is all the same whether you begin at the beginning or in the middle of an essay; that the sentences are gems, perhaps, but that there is no connecting thread, and no organic whole is formed. The criticism is partly true. Emerson himself knew that it was so. Writing to Carlyle he says:—

"I dot evermore in my endless journal, a line on every knowable in nature; but the arrangement loiters long, and I get a brick-kiln instead of a house."

Speaking of his next book as a raft:—

Expect nothing more of my powers of construction,—no ship-building, no clipper, smack, nor skiff even, only boards and logs tied together.

But this was inevitable. He looked on each man as a conduit-pipe of God, a ray of the Primal Light; and he held it as the cardinal point of literary ethics that a man should write nothing but "that which is known only to himself,"—should tell his own experience, express his own individuality, avoid being a mere echo. Each man is born to do something which no one else can do, and God wants it done. Let him do it, and not skulk about, quoting others, hiding behind them in fear of his individuality being seen. Let him talk with his mind, not out of his memory:—

> Insist on yourself; never imitate. . . Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail.[1]
>
> I see not any road of perfect peace which a man can walk, but after the counsel of his own bosom. Let him quit too much association, let him go home much, and stablish himself in those courses he approves.[2]
>
> I cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my sense of the sacredness of private integrity. All men, all things, the state, the church, yea, the friends of the heart are phantasms and unreal beside the sanctuary of the heart.[3]
>
> It is simpler to be self-dependent. . . . Everything real is self-existent.[4]

Some men appear to feel that they belong to a Pariah caste. They fear to offend, they bend and apologize,

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[1] ii., pp. 50, 83, 89. (*Self-Reliance.*)
[2] *ibid.*, p. 262. (*Heroism.*)
[3] i., p. 279. (*Lecture on the times.*)
[4] *ibid.*, p. 334. (*The Transcendentalist.*)

and walk through life with a timid step. . . The hero should find himself at home, wherever he is.[1]

Adhere to your own act, and congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant, and broken the monotony of a decorous age.[2]

One soul is a counterpoise of all souls, as a capillary column of water is a balance for the sea. If Æschylus be that man he is taken for, he has not yet done his office when he has educated the learned of Europe for a thousand years. He is now to approve himself a master of delight to me also. If he cannot do that, all his fame shall avail him nothing with me. I were a fool not to sacrifice a thousand Æschyluses to my intellectual integrity.[3]

All this may seem at first sight a laudation of principles which will lead to anarchy. But it is not so. For mankind exists in a social order, and Nature sees to it that anarchy is impossible. As soon as anarchy in a community is approached, the community begins to die. Order is a condition of corporate life. And order is attained by individuals respecting the self-respect of others. Self-reliance is good, but you must grant to others what you claim for yourself, and must be tolerant where you disagree. Perpetual compromise is enforced. Even Thoreau could not return to the animal completely, for he continued to wear clothes and to shelter himself with roof and walls. If he had not done so, Nature would have eliminated him by pneumonia or other means. And society acts as second nature, eliminating those whose self-

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[1] vi., p. 186. (*Behavior.*)
[2] ii., p. 260. (*Heroism.*)
[3] *ibid.*, p. 344. (*Intellect.*)

reliance injures other units (e.g., murderers) and discouraging in various ways such modes of action as are socially harmful. This is not inconsistent with a self-reliance doctrine. The individual selves, though real selves, form a stable whole by their mutual influences, as a solar system is stable though its members swing each in its own path and at its own speed; for their mutual perturbations cancel out into perfect balance, *e.g.*, in education :—

> I hear the outcry :—Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer,—Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. Be the companion of his thought, the friend of his friendship, the lover of his virtue,—but no kinsman of his sin. Let him find you so true to yourself that you are the irreconcilable hater of his vice and the imperturbable slighter of his trifling.[1]

Self-trust, then, is the first lesson. But, it may be asked, *what* is it that we trust,—who is the Trustee? Here Emerson, though no system-builder, is inevitably driven into philosophy.

In attempts to explain the universe, there are two ways of beginning,—two ends, so to speak, and you can please yourself as to which end you start at. You can begin with matter and work up to mind, or you can begin with mind and work down to matter. Either way, however, a chasm is reached, which has never yet been bridged.

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[1] x., p. 144. (*Education.*)

Between the physics of the brain and the corresponding facts of consciousness, said Tyndall, there is a gap which is not bridged. The materialist, arguing up, cannot explain where mind comes from, and has to leave it unexplained, as a "property" of certain forms of matter, an "epi-phenomenon" or the like. The spiritualist,[1] arguing down, cannot explain matter, and tends to regard it as illusory or at most temporary. Both fail: but the spiritualist has the advantage, for he is on firmer ground. He remains within his own immediate experience or extensions of it similar in kind; the materialist goes out of himself into matter—crosses the chasm with the help of what he denies as primal entity—and cannot get back with any appliance that matter can provide. Emerson starts at the spirit-end, taking his immediate experience as his standing-ground. Examining that experience, he finds that a prominent and as it seems to him the most valuable part of it is made up of thoughts, ideas, which "came" to him. He did not originate them. Yet they must have come from somewhere. Somebody or Something must have made them. Consequently his philosophy takes the shape of a psychology, and a mystical psychology. The soul, he thinks—with Wordsworth—must be greater than we know. The present consciousness must be only a small part of our total mind. Inspiration comes from a large background into a small brightly-lit foreground:—

[1] In the true sense of the word, as opposed to materialist. Not necessarily an adherent of what is known popularly as Spiritualism.

Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. . . All goes to show that the soul of man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie—an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. . . [1]

. . . we know . . . that we are much more; . . . in my trivial conversation with my neighbors, somewhat higher in each of us overlooks this by-play, and Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us.[2]

The soul is superior to its knowledge, wiser than any of its works.[3]

When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.[4]

A man is the façade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide . . . him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect it is genius; when it breathes through his will it is virtue; when it flows through his affection it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the

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[1] ii., pp. 268, 270. (*The Over-Soul.*)
[2] *ibid.*, p. 278. (*The Over-Soul.*)
[3] xii., p. 321. (*Modern Literature.*)
[4] ii., p. 268. (*The Over-Soul.*)

individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us. . . [1]

Quotations such as these could be multiplied indefinitely from Emerson's writings. The idea is his second main doctrine. The first was: Trust yourself. The second is in answer to the question Why should I? how dare I? and says: "Because you, the real you, are trustworthy, your soul being far greater than you know." And it is to be noted that Emerson's mystical psychology is now supported by data of which he knew little or nothing. Without some such conception of the soul there seems no explanation possible of the host of facts which psychical research is authenticating. The late F. W. H. Myers's great work, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death,* may be cited as the first and—so far—the most important attempt at an experimental, objective, inductive enquiry into the nature and proximate destiny of the soul. To those who are concerned in this work of psychical research, much of Emerson's teaching appeals with an almost startling appearance of prophetic insight.

Souls, then, are greater than the conscious personalities of individual people. In the language of modern psychology, there is a large subliminal region, below the threshold of consciousness. We are like icebergs, which float with only one-twelfth of their bulk above water. The largest part of us is hidden: we are not conscious of it.

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[1] *ibid.*, p. 271. (*The Over-Soul.*)

But there is more than that to be said. Somehow or other, souls are connected, not only by communicating through the senses, but in a more subtle way,—more subtle even than telepathy, which Emerson would have accepted as some small further confirmation of his doctrine. This more subtle connexion seems to be in the subliminal or submerged part. It is indicated, for instance, in Conscience :—

> I seek my satisfaction at my neighbor's cost, and I find that he has an advocate in my own breast, interfering with my private action.

In other words, somehow or other that which is in him is also in me. All souls are related to each other. Sundered here, they are in contact or merged higher up. There is a universal soul behind our individual life. We are inlets of the same sea. And

> the heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of *His* and *Mine* ceases. His is mine. I am my brother and my brother is me.[1]

And, to take the next step, this soul merges on the farther side into a far greater spirit ; into God. Behind the whole material universe, which is His body, the Spirit of God dwells, immanent and transcendent, both at once, for He saturates the visible universe, while not limited by its limits.

In this spirituality, this beginning at the right end, Emerson was probably the most powerful

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[1] ii., p. 124. (*Compensation.*)

anti-materialistic influence of the nineteenth century. Thought is before things ; it produces them. Forth Bridges, Panama Canals, aeroplanes, super-Dreadnoughts and submarines and wireless telegraphy exist first in the idea of inventor and constructor, before they take shape in matter, becoming visible to others :—

> You admire this tower of granite, weathering the hurts of so many ages. Yet a little waving hand built this huge wall, and that which builds is better than that which is built. . . Better than the hand and nimbler was the invisible thought which wrought through it; and thus ever, behind the coarse effect, is a fine cause, which, being narrowly seen, is itself the effect of a finer cause.[1]

> Earth proudly wears the Parthenon,
> As the best gem upon her zone,
> And Morning opes with haste her lids
> To gaze upon the Pyramids ;
> O'er England's abbeys bends the sky,
> As on its friends, with kindred eye ;
> For out of Thought's interior sphere
> These wonders rose to upper air.[2]

This idealistic placing of reality in the noumenal, not the phenomenal, is characteristic of deep minds. The seen things are temporal, the unseen things eternal :—

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[1] ii., p. 302. (*Circles.*)
[2] ix., p. 7. (*The Problem.*)

O what are heroes, prophets, men,
But pipes through which the breath of Pan doth blow
A momentary music. Being's tide
Swells hitherward, and myriads of forms
Live, robed with beauty, painted by the sun;
Their dust, pervaded by the nerves of God,
Throbs with an overmastering energy
Knowing and doing. Ebbs the tide, they lie
White hollow shells upon the desert shore,
But not the less the eternal wave rolls on
To animate new millions, and exhale
Races and planets, its enchanted foam.

The earlier figure—of music and instrument—has been a favourite with other seers. Leibnitz speculates on "un seul esprit, qui est universel et qui anime tout l'univers,—comme un même souffle de vent fait sonner différemment divers tuyaux d'orgue."[1] Burns asks: "Are we a piece of machinery which, like the Æolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident?" And Coleridge versifies it in *The Æolian Harp*:—

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps divinely framed,
That tremble into thought as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each, and God of all?

This poem, or perhaps something of Emerson's—whose writings he called his Bible, carrying them everywhere—probably inspired William Sharp in some early lines:—

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[1] *Considérations sur la Doctrine d'un Esprit universel.*

> We all are wind-harps casemented on Earth,
> And every breath of God that falls may fetch
> Some dimmest echo of a faint refrain
> From even the worst strung of all of us.[1]

The idea has no doubt presented itself to many minds, but few have been so possessed by it as Emerson. And his daily experience proved the truth of it to him. He was not a thinker so much as a receiver. He kept his strings in order, and let the breeze of God play on them: going daily to the woods to listen for the thoughts, not originated by him, he held, though coloured by the temperament of the individual through which these inspirations of the Universal Mind passed. He believed, with Carlyle, that it is the direct inspiration of the Almighty that giveth us understanding:—

> We lie open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature, to the attributes of God.[2]
> As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul, where man the effect ceases, and God the cause begins.[3]

To return for the moment to the Æolian harp idea, it is noteworthy that Emerson was peculiarly sensitive to natural music of this kind. He writes of the gale making the pines into wind-harps, and he had an Æolian harp fixed in his study window; this is referred to in his poem *The Harp*. His ear

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[1] *Amid the Uplands.* See the *Memoir* by Mrs. Sharp, p. 20.
[2] ii., p. 272. (*The Over-Soul.*)
[3] *ibid.*, p. 271. (*The Over-Soul.*)

for music was not keen, and his highest praise was that "it sounded more like an Æolian harp than anything else,"—which is what he said of the singing in the Sistine Chapel at Rome, where he heard the Miserere sung before the Pope and Cardinals.[1]

It is almost amusing to note the half-irritated, half-admiring tone of Carlyle, with regard to his friend's shining abstractions. "How you go on," he says in a letter, "as if altogether on the Over-Soul, the Ideal, the Perfect or Universal and Eternal in this life of ours; and take so little heed of the frightful quantities of friction and perverse impediment there everywhere are; the reflections upon which in my own poor life made me now and then very sad, as I read you."[2] The difference was temperamental. Both men were prophets, but one saw the shadows and the other saw the light; and though war on the former is, in a way, much the same thing as praise of the latter, there is great subjective difference for the prophet himself. The man who can look at the light is greatly the happier. Emerson was pre-eminently gifted with this serene optimism. He was a man of unshakable faith. Whatever happened, he could believe that all was well. "Before all such questions," says Lord Gifford, "he stands uncovered and reverently silent. No proud denial, no cynic scoff, no heartless sneer escapes him; and without a theory of the universe he clings to its moral meaning." Life is for our education: the universe exists for the

[1] ix., p. 484. (Notes to *The Harp*.)
[2] vii., p. 345. (Notes to *Society and Solitude*.)

weal of souls; and though this may not be a philosophical system, it is enough to live by, if held by strong faith. And indeed this faith followed naturally from Emerson's Platonism. Believing existence to be ultimately spiritual and One, within which we individuals are "made to work together, like feet, like hands, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth," as Marcus Aurelius has it,[1] he could give up his small finite self to the wider purposes of that great and incomprehensible One, assured that if a man does his best he need not worry about his own finitude. The One knows :—

> One Life through all the immense creation runs,
> One Spirit is the Moon's, the sea's, the sun's;
> All forms in the air that fly, on the earth that creep,
> And the unknown nameless monsters of the deep,—
> Each breathing thing obeys one Mind's control,
> And in all substance is a single Soul.[2]

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[1] Myers's *Classical Essays*, p. 215.
[2] *ibid.*, p. 173. (Virgil: *Æneid.*)

CHAPTER IV.

Religion.

Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes once spoke of Emerson as "an iconoclast without a hammer, who took down our idols from their pedestals so tenderly that it seemed like an act of worship." Mr. Cabot, commenting, says: "I am not sure that he took them down, or ever thought it worth while that they should come down so long as they were really objects of worship. What he wished to disturb was formalism . . . the gazing after past revelations until we are blind to the present."[1]

This is very true. Emerson had no hostility to any faith that is really alive. He knew perfectly well that there will be different forms of religion as long as there are different human minds, and that comparatively low forms are the only ones that are comprehensible and acceptable to minds in a low stage of development. The main thing is to trust our own best leadings, and not to regard with too abject an eye the leadings expressed by others. God is not dead; He speaks in each living soul; and truth and good are better received at first hand from Him, than at secondhand through this or that

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[1] ii., p. 432. (Notes to *The Over-Soul.*)

other experient, who too often in past times has tried to put his experience into logical form—a creed—and then demanded "acceptance" thereof, not realising that the creed, though perhaps expressing his own experience as well as words may, nevertheless cannot carry over that experience into the soul of another. Emerson says: Get your own experience: listen to your own best self, which is an inlet of the deep of God. "Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string."

And he practised his own precept. He gave out his message, full of faith, and left people to make what they could of it. He declined to argue. He felt that argument is mean. The reasoners have no vision,—the two things are incompatible. "Argument burns up perception." It makes the mind busy and fussy, and destroys the placidity which is a condition of inspiration. Also, by introducing passion, bias, desire to convince, joy of victory, anger at defeat, it contracts the visual field—as in a hysteric's eyes—and disables the disputants for seeing all round the question. "Truth ceases to be truth when polemically stated."[1]

This prophetic and non-argumentative method resulted in situations humorous to look back on, though serious enough at the time. In 1838 Emerson gave an Address to the Divinity School in Cambridge.

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[1] v., p. 337. (Notes to "Race" in *English Traits*.) Emerson once gave a lecture in a Western city, and was subjected to cross-questioning by dialecticians present, who sought to make him prove his thesis. Arrived home, he remarked, with rueful amusement: "Their logicians rolled me in the dust." x., p. 524. (Notes to *Aristocracy*.)

He spoke his mind freely, dwelling on his favourite theme that there may be revelation now, if we will only have faith in a living God, and let Him speak, instead of turning back to dubious history and tradition, seeking to base religion on things said to have happened two thousand years ago. Religion is an inner thing; as soon as we seek outside of us for bases and supports, in history or church, we confess its absence within. Emerson sought to stimulate this real religion in his young hearers who were about to go forth as ministers, and the Address is a magnificent monument of piety and splendid English.

But it roused tremendous clamour. The "stern old war-gods," as Emerson calls them in his poem *Uriel* (*i.e.*, the old brigade of theologians), thundered at him from their various pulpits. The air was full of pamphlets. Mr. Ware, his former colleague at the Second Church, and himself a professor at the college, wrote asking for his "arguments," to which Emerson quite affably and candidly replied that he hadn't any. He told the truth as he saw it, but did not know "what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought. I delight in telling what I think; but if you ask me how I dare say so, or why it is so, I am the most helpless of mortal men."[1] The theologians discussed whether Emerson was a Christian or not, and some of them came to an unfavourable conclusion, even labelling him atheist. In short, he had fluttered the ecclesiastical dovecotes pretty badly, and it

[1] Holmes's *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 126.

was thirty years before the University decided that he was a fit and proper person to be asked to take any further part in its functions.

Meanwhile Emerson, though somewhat annoyed by the notoriety, was not seriously disturbed. He withdrew to Concord and went on with other work, leaving the hurricane to blow itself out. Dr. Holmes wittily remarked that "Emerson had little more than the part of Patroclus when the Greeks and Trojans fought over his body."[1] It is curious that the Address made such a stir in the supposedly liberal Unitarian circles of New England, but evidently the liberals were very conservative. The present situation between the European liberal theologians and the school of Drews, is almost an exact repetition of that created by Emerson's famous Address in 1838—which, by the way, stimulated Theodore Parker to enthusiastic activity, and thus had far-reaching indirect effects in the fostering of a real religious revival.

Most people confuse Religion and Theology. They think the former cannot exist without an intellectually-devised theological scheme. And indeed, in history, the one generally leads to the other. But the religion comes first. It is the first-hand experience of the soul. As soon as we begin to reason about it, it has gone as experience,—the fire is cold. The two cannot exist together. You cannot feel deeply and argue coldly at the same time. Emerson knew this, and urges a bold throwing overboard of the mechanical reasoning processes, when the higher inspirations visit us :—

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[1] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 116.

In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity; yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and colour. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hands of the harlot, and flee.[1]

It is worth mentioning here, that this "denial of God's personality" has been much misunderstood. As Emerson often said, he denied personality to God "because it was too little, not too much."[2] Personality is an affair of limitations. The idea of personality arises from the experience of our own little self; and to attribute the quality to God is blasphemous anthropomorphism. Any attribute that we can conceive, must be inadequate as applied to Him. He is high as heaven, what canst thou know? He taketh up the earth as a very little thing. Arcturus and Pleiades obey His word. The deep of Space is nowhere void of His presence. Therefore in our philosophy we must confess that God is too great for us to understand. In Him we live and move and have our being, and the part cannot understand the whole. A phagocyte in my blood cannot understand me. Agnosticism is intellect's duty.

But we are not all intellect. We feel and act as well as know. And on this side of our nature we may quite legitimately think of God in our own idiom. If it helps us—as it often does—to pray to God as to a great person, to feel out after Him, seeking communion and inspiration, we are justified

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[1] ii., p. 57. (*Self-Reliance.*)
[2] *ibid.*, p. 391. (Notes to *Self-Reliance.*)

in temporarily attributing human qualities to Him—the best qualities that we can conceive. They will be inadequate, but it is the best we can do, and therefore we cannot be held responsible for not doing better. And the qualities so to be attributed, as Emerson himself says, are best summed up in the great word of Jesus: "Father."

As regards preaching, Emerson was chiefly insistent that the preacher shall speak from his own experience, first-hand, giving what wisdom life may have taught him, and not quoting that of others as a makeshift. In the famous *Address* he refers to a preacher who "sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more." The man had lived in vain—had nothing of his own to say:—

> He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed and planted and talked and bought and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches, his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all.[1]

Annoying, truly; yet Emerson himself says in his Journal that "the next best thing to good preaching is bad preaching. I have even more thoughts during or enduring it than at other times."[2]

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[1] i., p. 138.
[2] i., p. 428. (Notes to the *Address*.)

Probably we all have; but the thoughts are unfortunately not the right sort, being homicidal rather than devotional.

A curious thing about Emerson is that he never seems to have gone through any particular struggle or even depression, in attaining the saving faith. He had none of Goethe's suicidal tendencies, no Shelleyan atheistic revolt. He had faith from the beginning; threw himself on his own intuitions from the start. Carlyle had to make his exodus from Houndsditch, get rid of the Jewish old clothes and the Calvinism in which he had been brought up, before he could even get within sight of any restful Canaan. Emerson had scarcely any difficulty. It was partly temperamental, for he naturally relied more completely on his intuitions than Carlyle did, and was therefore less disturbed by external systems; but the temperament itself was largely the result of his heredity and environment. The religious atmosphere of Boston was much milder than that of Ecclefechan. Emerson's father was a cultivated clergyman, Carlyle's was a working mason: and their environment differed to the same extent. There was little insistence on dogma—comparatively—in Boston Unitarianism; and Emerson freed himself with little effort, and with maintenance of perfect serenity.

The differences, nevertheless, were vital. Channing, the greatest of the Unitarian divines, once said: "I am little of a Unitarian," for he realised that New England Unitarianism, though learned and polished and eminently respectable, was an external and intellectual religion, an affair chiefly of logic and copy-book morals: while he

himself felt that no religion is true if it does not come from the heart. Here Emerson and Channing are at one. The former said: "I am more of a Quaker than anything else," and it was true. He waited on the Lord,—waited for Divine leadings. There was no salvation for him in a book, however ancient; or in a cultus, however respectable. The Spirit saith to us individually: Is it well with thee? Souls are not saved in bundles. To everyone, therefore, he says: Trust your own best self: it is the only Way.

His tolerance, however, was complete. He could find some good in all systems and all people. He "took them by their best handle." He could write lovingly of Montaigne the Sceptic, but he preferred an earnest priest to a narrow denier. Always it was affirmation that attracted him, not negation. Consequently he could praise any positive system, even the ecclesiastical, which moreover affected his sense of beauty by its stateliness:—

> I like a church; I like a cowl;
> I love a prophet of the soul;
> And on my heart monastic aisles
> Fall like sweet strains, or pensive smiles.[1]

If he had been at Oxford, England, instead of Cambridge, Mass., he would probably have been associated with Pusey or Newman; though whether he would have been logical enough to follow the latter to the only rational halting-place if external authority be admitted, is doubtful. He was not

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[1] ix., p. 6. *The Problem.*

logically endowed: but if he had been at Oxford he might have developed his reason and lost some of his confidence in intuition, and the world would have been the poorer for it.

As it was, he was indeed more of a Quaker than anything else, if one had to class him with any of the sects. He used language very like theirs, with regard to "leadings."

I do not pretend to any commandment or large revelation. But if at any time I form a plan, propose a journey or a course of conduct, I find, perhaps, a silent obstacle in my mind that I cannot account for. Very well; I let it lie, think it may pass away; if it does not pass away, I yield to it, obey it. You ask me to describe it. I cannot describe it. It is not an oracle, not an angel, not a dream, not a law; it is too simple to be described; it is but a grain of mustard seed. But such as it is, it is something which the contradiction of all mankind could not shake.[1]

How like the *daimon* of Socrates! The fact that two of the wisest of mankind had this warning inner Voice, should be an effective deterrent to a too vigorous intellectualism.

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[1] Charles J. Woodbury's *Talks with Emerson*, p. 115.

CHAPTER V

Science.

It is often remarked how up-to-date Emerson is, in matters of science. The principle of evolution was basic to his thought, even in his earliest published work. As motto to *Nature* (second edition, published 1849, though the thought is in the whole essay, first published in 1836) he puts this verse :—

> A subtle chain of countless rings
> The next unto the farthest brings ;
> The eye reads omens where it goes,
> And speaks all languages the rose,
> And, striving to be man, the worm
> Mounts through all the spires of form.

This was ten years before *The Origin of Species* was published. It seems probable that Emerson acquired his evolutionary thought from Leibnitz, Schelling, and Oken (*via* Coleridge), in the first instance. He had also read Lee's *Life of Cuvier*, Chambers' *Vestiges of Creation*, and some of Buffon. In 1835 he read Lyell's *Geology*, which would greatly confirm him in the acceptance of Continuity as against catastrophism in inorganic nature, and

he evidently carried the idea right through, for we find constantly such statements as these :—

The gases gather to the solid firmament ; the chemic lump arrives at the plant, and grows ; arrives at the quadruped, and walks ; arrives at the man, and thinks.[1]

The fossil strata show us that Nature began with rudimental forms and rose to the more complex as fast as the earth was fit for their dwelling-place ; and that the lower perish as the higher appear. Very few of our race can be said to be yet finished men. We still carry sticking to us some remains of the preceding inferior quadruped organisation.[2]

Plants are the young of the world, vessels of health and vigour ; but they grope ever upward towards consciousness ; the trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground.[3]

He (Leibnitz) says to the caterpillar, How dost thou, brother ? Please God, you shall yet be a philosopher.[4]

The book of Nature is the book of Fate. She turns the gigantic pages,—leaf after leaf,—never re-turning one. One leaf she lays down, a floor of granite ; then a thousand ages, and a bed of slate ; a thousand ages, and a measure of coal ; a thousand ages, and a layer of marl and mud : vegetable forms appear ; her first misshapen animals, zoöphyte, trilobium, fish ; then saurians,—rude forms, in which she has only blocked her future statue, concealing under these unwieldy monsters the fine type of her coming king. The face of the planet cools and dries, the races meliorate, and man is born. But when a race has lived its term, it comes no more again.[5]

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[1] iv., p. 11. (*Uses of Great Men.*)
[2] vi., p. 165. (*Culture.*)
[3] iii., p. 181. (*Nature.*)
[4] ix., p. 457. (Notes on an unpublished lecture.)
[5] vi., p. 15. (*Fate.*)

It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come.[1]

On the darker side of evolution—so to speak—the pains and penalties of heredity,—Emerson has a finely expressive paragraph, which the eugenists of to-day might take as a text:—

How shall a man escape from his ancestors, or draw off from his veins the black drop which he drew from his father's or his mother's life? It often appears in a family as if all the qualities of the progenitors were potted in several jars,—some ruling quality in each son or daughter of the house; and sometimes the unmixed temperament, the rank unmitigated elixir, the family vice is drawn off in a separate individual, and the others are proportionally relieved. We sometimes see a change of expression in our companion and say his father or his mother comes to the windows of his eyes, and sometimes a remote relative.[2]

This was apparently written about 1850, and seems to have been the inspiration of Holmes's novel *The Guardian Angel*, in which we find the variegated ancestry of Myrtle Hazard, including a famous beauty, an Indian, and a witch who was burned at the stake, coming to the windows of her eyes in turn. These ideas were very much in the air about this time in New England, for *The House of the Seven Gables* similarly portrays the outcropping of the puritan Pyncheon in his descendants. Probably this interest in heredity, of which Holmes's

[1] iii., p. 180. (*Nature.*)
[2] vi., pp. 9, 10. (*Fate.*)

Elsie Venner is another example, was largely due to Lyell's *Geology*, which was published in 1835. But it is curious how prophetically Emerson accepts the full Darwinian doctrine of twenty years later. No doubt he was prepared for it temperamentally and by his reading of the Greek thinkers who so strenuously sought to explain Nature by One principle. Heraclitus and Zenophanes in particular were favourites with him. His conceptions were dynamic, not static. He must see Nature as continual advance and rise. Then, as is his Plato-like habit, lifting and translating the material into the spiritual, extending evolution to the whole history of the soul, inner as well as outer, he finely says :—

Within every man's thought is a higher thought—within the character he exhibits to-day, a higher character. The youth puts off the illusions of the child, the man puts off the ignorance and tumultuous passions of youth ; proceeding thence puts off the egotism of manhood, and becomes at last a public and universal soul. He is rising to greater heights, but also rising to realities ; the outer relations and circumstances dying out, he entering deeper into God, God into him, until the last garment of egotism falls, and he is with God—shares the will and the immensity of the First Cause.[1]

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[1] viii., p. 348. (*Immortality*.) It is difficult to reconcile this with the teaching of Emerson's favourite modern poet, for Wordsworth in the " Ode " regards the child as nearer heaven than the adult. No doubt Emerson would have declined to attempt reconciliation, and would have said that both must be true somehow.

It is noteworthy that Emerson, in his presentment of Evolution, emphasises effort from within, to which Lamarckian position we are now coming back—partly in consequence of Samuel Butler's teaching—after a period of too great emphasis on Natural Selection. The form of a living thing is determined not entirely by the unconscious weeding-out process, but partly by the "want" of the thing and its ancestors. The giraffe has a long neck because the short-necked ones were not so well adapted to cropping high twigs,—that is the natural selection side; but also partly because giraffes *want* a long neck, for that useful purpose. There is impulse, effort; "striving to be man, the worm mounts through all the spires of form."

Remark the unceasing effort throughout nature at somewhat better than the actual creatures.[1]

It is Bergson's doctrine of creative evolution, of the *élan vital* which presses forward and ever forward, pronounced long before the famous French philosopher was heard of or even born.

It is dangerous to prophesy unless you know, but Emerson risked a few predictions. He speaks of transfusion of the blood, which shall enable a man to change his blood as often as his linen. And "steam . . . is ruddering the balloon, and the next war will be fought in the air,"[2] a prediction which Holmes treated with rather contemptuous

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[1] i., p. 372. (*Young American.*)
[2] v., p. 161. (*Wealth.*)

incredulity.[1] This was in 1856. The next war was to come very quickly—the American Civil War—and it was not fought in the air, nor is it steam that rudders our aeroplanes and dirigibles; but in essentials Emerson's vision was true, for the Great War was largely fought in the air—not so much as to actual combats as to information-gaining, on which ranging and tactics depend.

There is a quaint scientific sentence in the second essay called *Nature* :—

> They say that by electro-magnetism, your salad shall be grown from the seed, whilst your fowl is roasting for dinner: it is a symbol of our modern aims and endeavors,—of our condensation and acceleration of objects; but nothing is gained: nature cannot be cheated: man's life is but seventy salads long, grow they swift or grow they slow.

Holmes makes fun of the celeritous salad, and refers to Jules Verne as a likely authority on the subject; but in these days of Sir Oliver Lodge's successful experiments in the electrification of crops, Holmes's gibe falls flat, and Emerson would have the laugh of him if they could discuss the question now,—or at least they would be quits.[2]

The particular science to which Emerson was most strongly drawn, was astronomy. The Essays are full of references to the stars, both in their scientific and—so to speak—emotional aspect.

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[1] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 257. "Possibly; but it is perhaps as safe to predict that it will be fought on wheels; the soldiers on bicycles, the officers on tricycles."

[2] *ibid.*, p. 186.

Speaking of creed-narrowness, and the widening of mind brought about by the study of the immense physical universe of which our planet is but a tiny particle, he pithily says: "The narrow sectarian cannot read astronomy with impunity."[1] He himself had read Lives of Kepler and Newton, also Herschel's *Astronomy*, and in his European tour of 1833 he had done homage at the tomb of Galileo in Florence. He often said that he hoped old age might bring him leisure to study the subject.[2] Its mathematics, however, would have been a barrier to any close acquaintance with astronomical physics.

And indeed the stars were more to him as things of remote, mysterious grandeur and beauty, than as exemplifiers of law. Kant said that two things filled him with ever new and increasing admiration and awe,—the starry heavens above, and the moral law within. Emerson had the same feeling:—

> One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.[3]

The stars awaken reverence, partly by their

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[1] viii., p. 211. (*Progress of Culture.*)
[2] i., p. 405. (Notes to *Nature.*)
[3] *ibid.*, p. 7. (*Nature.*)

remoteness and inaccessibility, which assure their continued mystery, leaving scope for the play of imagination, wonder, awe :—

The ancients are only venerable to us because distance has destroyed what was trivial; as the sun and stars affect us only grandly, because we cannot reach to their smoke and surfaces and say, Is that all?[1]

Stars taunt us by a mystery
Which we could never spell.[2]

And probably the most-quoted sentence of all the much-quoted epigrams of Emerson, is the famous "Hitch your wagon to a star," in the essay *Civilization*.[3] Dr. Holmes says of this aphorism that it is worthy to stand by the side of that which Juvenal says came from heaven.[4] It is indeed an inspiration. Emerson uses it first in a material way, pointing out how, in a sea-shore mill, the tides are made to drive wheels and grind corn, the moon being thus harnessed to our tasks. Then, lifting the thought into the higher plane, he repeats the maxim. Aim at the good. Be on the side of the angels :—

Hitch your wagon to a star. Let us not fag in paltry works which serve our pot and bag alone. Let us not lie and steal. No god will help. We shall find all their teams going the other way,—Charles's Wain,

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[1] xii., p. 387. (Papers from the *Dial. Past and Present.*)
[2] ix., p. 17. (*The World-Soul.*)
[3] vii., pp. 28, 30. (*Civilization.*)
[4] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 252.

Great Bear, Orion, Leo, Hercules: every god will leave us. Work rather for those interests which the divinities honor and promote,—justice, love, freedom, knowledge, utility.[1]

It would be difficult to frame a moral exhortation more eloquently than that, maintaining at the same time a complete truthfulness and absence of rhapsody.

[1] vii., p. 30. Emerson tripped here, in a little matter of detail: Charles's Wain and the Great Bear are the same constellation.

CHAPTER VI.

Social.

The philosopher and seer is not usually a "club-able" man. His inner activities are not compatible with gregarious habits. He must live mostly aloof from the crowd, and must even deny himself the indulgence of many desirable friendships. Thus it was with Emerson. He attended the Saturday Club with Hawthorne, Holmes, Longfellow, and others—though he mostly sat silent—and he was in the habit of speaking genially in passing salutation to strangers whom he met in his walks; but his life was essentially inner, and he was never very sociable. Perhaps it was partly due to lack of conversational fluency. He was so scrupulously anxious to get just the right word to fit his thought, that he spoke with hesitancy; O. W. Holmes says that his talk was like a well-dressed woman picking her way across a muddy road, or like someone crossing a brook on stepping-stones.[1] He was quite remarkably destitute of gift for extempore speech. On several occasions when he apparently spoke extempore, the fact was—as Mr. Woodbury informs us,—that the speech had been written out

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[1] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 364.

and memorized. Once after hearing an able and apt extempore speech from Phillips, he said he would give "a thousand shekels for that man's secret." Of Beecher's oratory he said: "What will you do with an eloquent man? He makes you laugh, and you cannot throw your egg."[1]

But the lack of fluency was not the only reason for his solitariness. His spirit dwelt remote from the small-talk of average conversation. He lived habitually on heights which others reach only by spurts, in their best moments. If people have nothing to say worth saying, let them be silent. "Do not *say* things. What you *are* thunders at me over what you say." The boring insect bores for food or for egg-laying, and thus has some excuse; but the human equivalent bores that he may bore. Especially was Emerson severe on querulousness over slight ailments:—

> . . . there is one topic peremptorily forbidden to all well-bred, to all rational mortals, namely, their distempers. If you have not slept, or if you have slept, or if you have headache, or sciatica, or leprosy, or thunderstroke, I beseech you by all angels to hold your peace, and not pollute the morning . . . by corruption and groans.[2]

If Emerson yielded to the pull downwards to average levels, it spoilt his after-flight, weighted his wings. "My doom and my strength is to be solitary," he said, evidently realising that he missed much

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[1] Woodbury's *Talks with Emerson*, p. 160.
[2] vi., p. 196. (*Behavior.*)

pleasure thereby, but that the solitariness was a condition of his power. It is significant that even his intimates called him *Mr.* Emerson. His fine and delicate spirit had to fence itself off from familiarity :—

I prefer a tendency to stateliness to an excess of fellowship. . . Let us not be too much acquainted. . . In all things I would have the island of a man inviolate. Let us sit apart as the gods, talking from peak to peak all round Olympus.[1]

Friendship should be surrounded with ceremonies and respects.[2]

I do then with my friends as I do with my books, I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them. . . I cannot afford to speak much with my friend. If he is great, he makes me so great that I cannot descend to converse. In the great days, presentiments hover before me in the firmament. I ought then to dedicate myself to them. . . Then, though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own. It would indeed give me a certain household joy to quit this lofty seeking, this spiritual astronomy, or search of stars, and come down to warm sympathies with you ; but then I know well I shall mourn always the vanishing of my mighty gods.[3]

If Emerson was like this with his friends, it is to be expected that he was more so with mere acquaintances. And truly, in spite of his serenity,

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[1] iii., pp. 136, 137. (*Manners.*)
[2] vi., p. 187. (*Behavior.*)
[3] ii., pp. 214, 215. (*Friendship.*)

he did not achieve the height of suffering fools gladly. He was often pestered with visits from celebrity-hunters, crank devotees of various brands, as well as of genuine disciples of saner kind. Many of them, though ostensibly coming as admirers, proceeded to talk about themselves and their pet subjects, at wearisome length. He was ordinarily a good listener, and too kind-hearted to hurt a tedious talker's feelings by winding the clock up (as the present writer's grandfather used to do as a gentle hint to a late visitor), and he suffered in consequence :—

> I weary of dealing with people, each cased in his several insanity. . . I am not large man enough to treat him firmly and unsympathetically as a patient, and if treated equally and sympathetically as sane, his disease makes him the worst of bores.[1]

And elsewhere he has said how he dreaded the autobiography which usurped the largest part and sometimes the whole of the discourse of very worthy persons whom he knew.[2] There is both tragedy and comedy here. It seems pitiful to think that a man of Emerson's qualities should have had his time wasted and his nerves racked by thoughtless and stupid people. We can hardly estimate how much he suffered at their hands. Yet all who knew him were impressed by his perfect amiability ; and, as Holmes well says, such unfailing urbanity,

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[1] vi., p. 370. (Notes to *Culture.*)

[2] *ibid.*, p. 372. (Notes to *Culture.*) "The pest of society is egotists." (vi., p. 132. *Culture.*)

in a nature fastidious as was his in its whole organization, implies a power of self-command quite out of the ordinary.

It is always a significant fact when a man is most loved and respected where he is best known. It was so with Emerson. This prophet had most honour in his own place and among his own folk. "He was most of all believed in, honoured, beloved, lamented, in the little village circle that centred about his own fireside."[1] And he had a natural human longing for human companionship and intercourse, if the standard could be high. "A new person is to me a great event, and hinders me from sleep."[2] But the new person often turns out disappointing; at first he is unknown, a sea to swim in, but you speedily find his farther shore,—the sea is a pond, and "you care not if you never see it again."[3] Consequently he was slow to seek further acquaintances, and when asked permission to have presented to him some person for whom he felt no affinity, he would answer, with a whimsical smile: "Whom God hath put asunder, why should man join together?"[4]

But he did others many a good turn, and went out of his way to be of service. The case of Whitman is an example. Emerson recognised the good qualities of *Leaves of Grass*, but thought the book was spoiled by its very frank and unnecessarily sexual imagery in such poems as "The Body

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[1] Holmes: *Life of Emerson*, p. 417.
[2] ii., p. 195. (*Friendship.*)
[3] *ibid.*, p. 308. (*Circles.*)
[4] *Talks with Emerson.* (Woodbury.) p. 127.

Electric." He visited Whitman and spent several hours in discussing the point and urging expurgation; but Whitman held to his own way, and rather bragged of it afterwards—referring to Emerson as too fastidious, over-sophisticated, caring chiefly for elaborate finish, polish, style. However, they remained on friendly terms, in spite of a rather mean advertising dodge of Whitman's, which most people would have resented. Without Emerson's permission he printed, on the outside cover of *Leaves of Grass*, the sentence "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," from a letter just received. Emerson's fame was at its height, and his praise would have sufficed to sell any book. So far as is known, he made no protest, though his reputation suffered, and misunderstandings arose; for it seemed as though he endorsed the whole contents of the book, which was far from being the case.[1]

In labelling Emerson a recluse, a solitary, an unsociable, we must not forget that as a matter of fact he came in touch with a large number of people of all sorts in his winter lecturing tours—a larger number than many more sociable people ever meet—and this saved him from any danger of becoming un-human. He was always a good listener, if the speaker had anything in the least informing to say, and he listened with special interest to the hard-working pioneer folk whom he met in the remoter districts. And in those days there was little civilisation outside New England.

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[1] Cooke's *R. W. Emerson*, p. 233.

His journeys were arduous. Three times he crossed the Mississippi on foot, and once in a rowing boat amid grinding ice-cakes. Long prairie-drives were frequent, to make connexions for reaching his next town, and he often had to stay in the rudest of taverns. Twenty years of this were endured with cheerful courage, and not without profit in increasing catholicity of mind. From these people, uncouth but virile, Emerson learnt a great respect for the honest, blunt, hard-working, nation-making pioneer ;[1] and probably at times felt himself somewhat of a social parasite, unable to do anything for himself, as most mere writers and talkers at times do feel.

It must not, of course, be taken that Emerson, even at home, was an actual hermit of the Thoreau kind, or even as shy as Tennyson was. He often invited friends in for a social evening. But the friends were of a sort that were worth asking, for the stimulation they supplied. The town of Concord at that time was the home of a remarkable number of more or less famous men, and of several geniuses. Among those who gathered at Emerson's fireside were Longfellow, Lowell, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, O. W. Holmes, Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa, and many lesser lights ; and, notwithstanding the hesitancy of Emerson's speech, and the absent-minded silences of Hawthorne—a remote and gloomy spirit—there must have been many conversations worth reporting.

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[1] "Shall I tell you the secret of the true scholar? It is this: Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him." (*Greatness.*)

Unfortunately, the group had no Boswell. Dr. Holmes would have best fulfilled that office, but he evidently never felt quite at home on the mystic heights reached by some of the group. He was a very human man, with a sparkling wit and, if one may say it without irreverence, an eye to the commercial side of the literary craft; and he no doubt regarded many of these people as the most unmitigated of cranks. Alcott in particular was a dreamer. Emerson says that he might have considered the Platonic world as cloudland if he had not known Alcott, "who is a native of that country." In 1878 a sort of chapel was built, through the generosity of a friend, in the grounds of the Orchard House, where the Alcotts had lived since 1857, and near "The Wayside," where Hawthorne lived. In this chapel a School of Philosophy was held for six weeks each summer, until 1886. Emerson gave a course of lectures there, each summer as long as he lived, assisted by his daughter Ellen, who sat by him and found the lost places in his notes; for by this time he was seventy-five, and failing in memory and mental power. Hither came many seekers after Truth, and many cranks, such as foregather in Summer Schools at Letchworth and elsewhere. Strange beings were seen in Concord streets, and were safely put down by the inhabitants as belonging to the philosophic tribe. Portentous subjects such as "The Genesis of the Maya" and "Reminiscence as Related to Pre-existence" were discussed in the "chapel," sometimes at an astonishing length. Dr. McCosh, then president of Princeton, lectured for five hours without stop, and some of the weaker brethren drifted out and

sat under the elms to recover.[1] But in this crank atmosphere Emerson retained complete balance and sanity, as Holmes has well said. And no doubt he exercised a wholesome influence on the other sages, ballasting their Platonic flights into the empyrean.

Some of Emerson's humorous comments on the freak reformers who swarmed in New England about this time, are among the best of his lighter utterances. In 1844, lecturing on "New England Reformers," he drew a diverting picture of the various conventions and their members :—

> They defied each other like a congress of kings, each of whom had a realm to rule, and a way of his own that made concert unprofitable. . . One apostle thought all men should go to farming, and another that no man should buy or sell, that the use of money was the cardinal evil; another that the mischief was in our diet, that we eat and drink damnation. These made unleavened bread, and were foes to the death to fermentation. It was in vain urged by the housewife that God made yeast, as well as dough, and loves fermentation just as dearly as He loves vegetation; that fermentation develops the saccharine element in the grain, and makes it more palatable and more digestible. No; they wish the pure wheat, and will die but it shall not ferment. . . Others attacked the system of agriculture, the use of animal manures in farming, and the tyranny of man over brute nature. . . Even the insect world was to be defended,—that had been too long neglected, and a society for the protection

[1] See an excellent article by Lilian Whiting, "The Idyl of Concord," in *Munsey's Magazine*, October, 1913.

of ground-worms, slugs and mosquitoes was to be incorporated without delay. . .[1] .

But with all this, as Emerson goes on to say, there was good done. All the din and debate indicated and encouraged a keener scrutiny of institutions and a strong desire for better things. The multiplicity of cross-purposes seemed to produce a welter of confusion, but out of it there emerged the changes best fitted to the time. No one of the various fanatics was right, for—as Emerson says in *Experience*—the individual is always mistaken; but out of the push-and-pull something is effected, though always an unlooked-for result.

> He designed many things, and drew in other persons as coadjutors, quarrelled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new and very unlike what he promised himself.[2]

Emerson kept somewhat aloof from the crank reformers, though watching their experiments, at Brook Farm and elsewhere, with a sort of amused yet half-serious interest. No doubt he was saved from joining them by his perception of their narrowness and by his distaste for the petty bickerings which broke out within the folds. He had no taste for quarrels. Yet his peaceableness was not due to weakness. It is on record that he once refused his hand to one who had spoken ill of a friend.[3]

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[1] iii., p. 252.
[2] *ibid.*, pp. 69, 70.
[3] Holmes's *R. W. E.*, p. 234.

CHAPTER VII.

Style.

If a stylist is one who writes for effect, thinking more of manner than matter, Emerson is not a stylist. But he nevertheless achieves a style which has no equal in its own field. His mastery of sound English is supreme, but it is always the thought that makes the form. He never uses a superfluous word, and his choice is unerring. This was partly his spontaneous genius, and partly a matter of critical selection and lapidary polishing afterwards. He carried a note book, writing down his thoughts when he " found himself felicitous " ; these sentences were afterwards sorted and arranged, and woven into lectures. This involved several siftings and weighings, and only the best survived. And, being first of all a speaker, preacher, and lecturer, he developed an ear for the cadence of a prose sentence, though his sense of rhythm in verse was always defective. Consequently his prose is the finest of its kind in English literature—perhaps the finest in any literature. It is loaded with thought, yet carries its burden lightly ; is never tedious or ponderous or pedantic. It is as condensed as Bacon, and as human as Montaigne, but far outsoars both of them in range. They are of the earth and the

understanding, Emerson can either walk or soar. They are utterly material ; he is spiritual.

There is no writer so suggestive. Every sentence takes us deeper into the subject than we were able to see before, or shows us entirely new things, or exhibits the old in a new aspect. The mind is stimulated, and every paragraph—almost every sentence—initiates fresh trains of thought. The sentences would serve for sermon-texts. The amount of thought that is crammed into a few words is miraculous. After Emerson has said his say, all comment looks thin and dilute. He exhausts the subject :—

Fate is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought ; for causes that are unpenetrated.—*Fate.*

The world exists for the education of each man.—*History.*

Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail in.—*Experience.*

The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles.—*Nature* (the short essay).

Good manners are made up of petty sacrifices.—*Social Aims.*

I—this thought which is called I—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould.—*The Transcendentalist.*

As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God ; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.—*Nature :* " Spirit."

God builds His temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religions.—*Worship.*

Somewhat like Carlyle, though less so, Emerson instinctively used Anglo-Saxon forms, inclining to the simpler of two alternatives. He corrected his children if they said "commence" for "begin," and preferred "mend" to "improve." No doubt this detail is but one instance of his studied moderation in word and phrase. He hated high-sounding phrases and purple passages. Carlyle, writing about the second volume of Essays, which he was seeing through the press for his friend, compliments him on the style, while lamenting its incoherence in places :—

Pure genuine Saxon; strong and simple; of a clearness, of a beauty—But they did not, sometimes, rightly stick to their foregoers and their followers; the paragraph not as a beaten *ingot*, but as a beautiful square *bag of duck-shot* held together by canvas![1]

The incoherency, as already said, was inevitable. Emerson was very conscious of it, and once wittily likened himself to the subordinate devil who was put to twisting ropes of sand to keep him out of mischief :—

> The Asmodean task is mine,
> To twist my sand-heaps into twine,

and he never quite succeeded. There is often a chasm between sentences, which the reader must get across as best he can.

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[1] iii., p. 290. (*Notes.*)

Carlyle mentions his Saxon style, very justly; but it is also true that Emerson was a good Latinist, and it is frequently noticeable that in using a word derived from the Latin he is thinking of its true etymological meaning, rather than of the meaning which it conveys in modern use. For instance, in his use of "express," which means "to press out." In the lecture *Farming*, he commends nearness to Nature, and slights mere "drawing-room heroes," who, put beside the farmer, would shrivel in his presence: "he solid and unexpressive, they expressed to gold-leaf."[1] Similarly, in *Social Aims*, speaking of laughter, he remarks that it seems to require several generations of education to train a squeaking or a shouting habit out of a man, and that "sometimes, when in almost all expressions the Choctaw and the slave have been worked out of him, a coarse nature still betrays itself in his contemptible squeals of joy."[2] So in *Demonology* he uses "discovered" in its original sense of showing, uncovering, revealing, rather than of finding, when he says that "the poor ship-master discovered a sound theology, when in the storm at sea he made his prayer to Neptune, 'O God, thou mayst save me if thou wilt, and if thou wilt thou mayst destroy me; but, however, I will hold my rudder true.' "[3] In *Uses of Great Men* he similarly says: "Our globe discovers its hidden virtues, not only in heroes and archangels, but in gossips and

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[1] vii., p. 153.

[2] viii., p. 87. Cf. "I may here express a general remark," xi., p. 117. (*West India Emancipation.*)

[3] x., p. 14. The quotation is from Montaigne.

nurses." Speaking of "a careful and gloomy generation" in *The Scholar*,[1] he obviously means a generation full of care, not a thrifty or conscientiously task-fulfilling one. And in speaking of great men as beacon-points of light he pushes purism to the verge of unintelligibility by phrasing it "could we one day complete the immense figure which these flagrant points compose!"[2] Not all of his readers can be expected to remember the Latin *flagrans* and *flagrare*, to burn. Also he goes perhaps too far when he lays down the law in these matters: "Never use the word *development*, and be wary of the whole family of Fero."[3] Dr. Edward Emerson says of his father that "as for the family of *fero* and its participle *latum*, he would rather say 'choice' than 'preference,' 'give way' than 'defer,' 'gather' than 'infer,' 'bring together' than 'collate,' 'render' than 'translate.'"[4] Rather curiously, he did not like the Teutonic "standpoint" for "point of view," but the word is now domiciled in English, and even admitted into good society. It is short, simple, and picturesque, and deserves its position.

But these are details. In the larger matter of style in general—that indefinable quality—we continually have the delight, in reading Emerson, of hearing the thing said in the best possible way. His sentences are gems, as well they may be; for, over and above the original inspiration, he was

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[1] x., p. 262.
[2] iv., p. 33. (*Uses of Great Men.*)
[3] xii., p. 292. (*Art and Criticism.*)
[4] *ibid.*, p. 464. (Notes to *Art and Criticism.*)

continually sorting, sifting, rearranging, improving. He destroyed a large quantity of MS. notes which he thought below the printable standard. This is regrettable, for it is likely that he put the standard too high, and that much good stuff has perished. But anyhow these drastic methods assured us of the survival of that only which was fittest of the fit. There is no twaddle or platitude in Emerson's *Essays* and *Poems*. It is all concentrated, full of thought and beauty.

A feature of Emerson's writing is its concreteness. Perhaps some readers will think that "concreteness" is the one thing, above all, that the transcendentalist philosopher lacks. Nevertheless Emerson is above all things concrete. He will have words to represent things. He ties language closely to reality—as when, in his use of "express," "discover," etc., just commented on, he is clearly thinking of the physical act of pressing out and uncovering. In a note to a lecture he says :—

> Every thought must be expressed by some object in nature, and 'tis the fault of metaphysics that they endeavor to express themselves in words at as many removes from nature as possible.[1]

A profound remark. We forget the derivation of words, forget that they all were primarily attached to some action or natural object, and the result is that sometimes we "pay ourselves with words"—as Hobbes said—and really say nothing, though under the impression that we are very learned and

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[1] viii., p. 408.

lofty. Picturesque language is best—and simplest; language which calls up material images to the eye, pictures of natural objects.

Thus, for the great creative writer, close acquaintance with Nature is essential. Emerson fulfilled the requirement. He lived in the country, and spent much time out of doors. Though not so keen an observer as Thoreau, he was quite as receptive—or more so—to the spirit of nature, to the influences of sky and wind and wood and flower. His writings are full of this delight; and his language is at its best when dealing with such themes :—

The simple perception of natural forms is a delight. . . To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough.[1]

I see the spectacle of morning from the hilltop over against my house, from daybreak to sunrise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations; the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements? Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is

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[1] i., p. 16. (*Nature.*)

my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of færie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams.[1]

A fine passage, though no longer true of Germany, which has fallen like Lucifer—and like him through pride—since Boehme, Jacobi, Novalis, Goethe, Richter, Tieck, and Jung Stilling, from whom—*via* Carlyle, mostly—Emerson got his notions of the Teuton temperament.

In a lecture called "Country Life," Emerson said that he could not find it in his heart to chide the citizen who should ruin himself to buy a patch of heavy oak-timber.[2] This was almost autobiographical, for he had himself bought a wood-lot when money was not plentiful with him, for use chiefly as a retreat where he might listen to the Voice. The poem *Good-bye*—partially quoted in the next chapter, on his poetry,—is applicable through his whole life: for when he could meet with God in the bush, he had no need for the lore of Greece and Rome.

In "Blight," he laments man's lapse from the grace which gives friendliness with Nature, in language of unusual rhythm and stateliness:—

> . . . we are strangers to the stars,
> And strangers to the mystic beast and bird,
> And strangers to the plant and to the mine.
> The injured elements say, 'Not in us;'

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[1] i., p. 17. (*Nature.*)
[2] vii., p. 346.

And night and day, ocean and continent,
Fire, plant and mineral say, 'Not in us;'
And haughtily return us stare for stare.
For we invade them impiously for gain;
We devastate them unreligiously,
And coldly ask their pottage, not their love.[1]

He says "we," but he includes himself out of kindness to us. He is really speaking to the unregenerate, for the reproach does not apply to himself. In many other parts of his writings he shows plainly that he himself is quite at home with Nature:—

Because I was content with these poor fields,
Low, open meads, slender and sluggish streams,
And found a home in haunts which others scorned,
The partial wood-gods overpaid my love,
And granted me the freedom of their state,
And in their secret senate have prevailed
With the dear, dangerous lords who rule our life,
Made moon and planets parties to their bond,
And through my rock-like, solitary wont
Shot million rays of thought and tenderness.
For me, in showers, in sweeping showers, the Spring
Visits the valley;—break away the clouds,—
I bathe in the morn's soft and silvered air,
And loiter willing by yon loitering stream.

* * * * * * *

. . . The gentle deities
Showed me the lore of colors and of sounds,
The innumerable tenements of beauty. . .

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[1] ix., p. 140.

The polite found me impolite ; the great
Would mortify me, but in vain ; for still
I am a willow of the wilderness,
Loving the wind that bent me. All my hurts
My garden spade can heal. A woodland walk,
A quest of river-grapes, a mocking thrush,
A wild-rose, or rock-loving columbine,
Salve my worst wounds.[1]

The disjointedness of Emerson's style would be more marked in his own day than it is now. Literature was still suffering from the ponderosity of the eighteenth century, and the rounded periods of Gibbon and Johnson were the standard of comparison. Addison, Dryden, Goldsmith, De Quincey—all wrote ponderously, according to modern standards. Emerson was one of the first to break away. "Refuse the good models" was one of his maxims, and he followed it out. Other writers are good ; but "I also am a man." The result is a distinctive style which reads, moreover, with an astonishing modernity, and is perhaps even yet a little ahead of us. As stylist, Emerson was to English what Nietzsche has been to German : a simplifier, shortener of sentences and paragraphs, bringing clarity and ease where before there was cumbrousness and obscurity.

Contributing to this effect is his restraint. If Emerson was intolerant of anything, it was of looseness and intemperance of speech. He often advised young writers to read through their MSS., cutting out the adjectives and "very." He

[1] ix., p. 141 and foll. (*Musketaquid.*)

had no patience with people for whom everything was either "enchanting" or "horrid." We do not live among such extremes. Plain fact requires the positive degree. It was partly this moderation in language that endeared Montaigne to him. His St. Michel "never shrieks, or protests, or prays; no weakness, no convulsion, no superlative: does not wish to jump out of his skin. . ." It is a solidity and truthfulness which he admires, follows, and on every occasion recommends.

CHAPTER VIII.

Emerson the Poet.

Before estimating any writer's precise altitude on the Parnassian slopes, a preliminary question may be asked,—*viz.*, What *is* Poetry? Not long ago, language was not considered poetry unless it was measured off as with a yard-stick into the proper number of syllables or feet per line; and the jog-trot lilt of Pope and Dryden was the standard of perfection. Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth followed their genius instead of playing the sedulous ape to Pope, and broke the conventional mould. Browning may be said to have smashed it into smaller bits; and Whitman stamped on them, shouting gleefully. Yet Browning and Whitman are by general consent awarded the title of Poet, even at their roughest. Poetry, therefore, is not essentially a matter of form at all.

What it is, it is difficult to say. It does not involve rime (I usually spell it *rhyme*) for this is absent in the poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, as also in most of Shakespeare: nor any regular rhythm, if *Leaves of Grass* is poetry. The Greek *poiema* in fact was a "thing made and finished" only; the poet was a "maker," a creative craftsman, like the sculptor, painter, musical composer.

Aristotle says that the superiority of poetry consists "in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness," and from this comes the popular but vague definition that poetry is "impassioned truth." But such definitions emphasise too strongly the moral side. Beautiful language, true poetry, often contains little truth and not much passion: we feel that the poetry is in the beauty of the images evoked, or in the sheer unanalysable charm of the words as sounds, or—more generally—both combined. The more "thought" there is in poetry, the less poetical it is. Pope's *Essay on Man* has plenty of thought, but it thereby succeeds in being tunefully versified metaphysics rather than great poetry. Keats' *Ode to the Nightingale* has little thought, and only a gentle melancholy for its passion; and it is one of the gems of English poetry.

On the whole, we may say that poetry is to be judged by the mood that it awakes in us. It is real poetry if it makes us admire and rejoice in its beauty. On the objective and formal side, we may admit that the conventional idea of poetry is too closely involved with that of rhythm for divorce to be possible, and we may assent to the conventional ruling, provisionally, while denying its essentiality. It is useful to have some sort of criterion for the distinguishing of poetry from prose, and rhythm—a regularly recurring system of beats—is the only non-metaphysical distinguishing feature.

Emerson undoubtedly felt himself to be a poet. All his writings are inspirational—given to him by the Voice to which he "listened" in the woods—but apparently his poems came with an even more authentic sense of inspiration than the sentences

of his prose. He said, "I like my poems best because it is not I who write them."[1] But, however inspirational they were, his own critical faculty undoubtedly was dissatisfied, in spite of the remark just quoted. In his letters to John Sterling and others, he often deplores his lack of power to shape his thought in rhythmic verse; and his journals show how he laboured at the task, even from early boyhood. This incapacity is curious, for he had a most delicate ear for cadence in prose. It may be granted that a few of the shorter poems have a beautiful gem-like character, but he could not sustain the quality in the longer ones. He himself seemed to perceive this, for he thought *Days* his best poem, and it is certainly one of the shortest, consisting of eleven lines only. It has a quality and beauty of its own, though it is rather depressing and somewhat puzzling. We can hardly suppose that Emerson regarded himself as a failure, for no writer ever followed more faithfully his highest leadings, and he believed those leadings to be veritably divine; yet in this poem there is wistful regret, as of one who sees that he has wasted his life by timidity,—by being contented with small things when great ones could have been grasped. Did Emerson feel that his scholarship, his gift of phrasing, and his fine voice, would have lifted him to the level of Daniel Webster if his ambitions had led him to the law—as in his brother William's case—or was he only expressing an imagined mood? The poem is a puzzle, but a beautiful one:—

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[1] i., xxxviii. (*Biographical sketch.*)

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.
I, in my pleachéd garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.

It is interesting to note how Emerson expresses this thought in the more sober medium of prose. In *Works and Days* he says :—

The days are ever divine as to the first Aryans. . . They come and go like muffled and veiled figures, sent from a distant friendly party ; but they say nothing, and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them as silently away.[1]

It is good but not distinguished prose : while the poem is magnificent poetry, unsurpassable in its sombre yet jewelled beauty. The old Elizabethan word *pleached* (intertwined, as of branches of trees or hedge, and perhaps here used with the sense of folded in, secluded, hermit-like) gives a curiously pleasing flavour to the sonnet, perhaps partly because it is such a perfect fit as regards euphony.

It may be, however, that Emerson was only voicing the wistful regret which all of us feel when

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[1] vii., p. 168.

we look closely at the way we have used our time. So much of it seems to have been spent over trivialities or worse :—

If I work in my garden and prune an apple-tree, I am well enough entertained, and could continue indefinitely in the like occupation. But it comes to mind that a day is gone, and I have got this precious nothing done. I go to Boston or New York and run up and down on my affairs : they are sped, but so is the day. I am vexed by the recollection of this price I have paid for a trifling advantage.[1]

Another poem which would be very puzzling if we did not possess the key, is *Uriel*. Indeed, it would seem that even O. W. Holmes, who was on the spot and knew Emerson, failed to see its meaning, for he says that it is a poem which " finds itself perilously near to the gulf of unsounded obscurity."[2] To the uninitiated reader who uses an edition without notes, this is true enough. The poem seems to be about the fall from grace of Uriel, though we are not told what his particular failing was. A mysterious Seyd, walking among the Pleiades—an astonishingly remote sauntering spot or *daidling bit*, as Mr. Andrew Lang would have said—overheard the young gods talking, and they were evidently talking treason, like the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost ;* whereupon the " stern old war-gods shook their heads," which seems a curiously ineffective and feeble thing for stern old war-gods

[1] iv., p. 21. (*Uses of Great Men.*)
[2] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 398.

to do. Then Uriel's voice of cherub scorn was heard, and "the gods shook, they knew not why," as the last line kindly informs us.[1]

Uriel of course is the Archangel of the sun, and Emerson would be familiar with that bright spirit, for he had known Milton's epic from his boyhood. But Seyd seems inexplicable, and if he is Saadi the Persian poet, one does not quite see what he is doing among the Pleiades. The whole thing is as mysterious as John Keats' porridge in Browning's poem *Popularity*, until we get the key. As a matter of fact, it is an allegorical interpretation of what happened after Emerson's Address to the Divinity students, already mentioned in chap. iv. Uriel, the sun-spirit, is Emerson himself; the young deities are the divinity students; the stern old war-gods are the old theologians—professors and preachers—who were horrified by Emerson's heresies. It is all clear enough, and very humorous; but it must have been a riddle to the majority of readers. And indeed it is condemned by Emerson's own canons, for he says in a letter that "poetry that needs a date is no poetry" (ix, 403).

A few of the other poems also "need a date," being more or less autobiographical. *Good-bye* was not a farewell to civilisation on taking to the woods (retiring to the country) in 1835, but is the expression of Emerson's feelings when released from school duties,—for, to a shy youth of nineteen, a class of young ladies was a rather alarming affair. This little poem is a remarkable production for a boy of

[1] ix., pp. 13-15.

that age, and it is curiously and exceptionally perfect in its rhythm. Its author seems to have thought little of it, for he apologised for sending *juvenilia* when he sent it to *The Western Messenger* in 1839, and he omitted it from the *Selected Poems* of 1876. But it has won its way, and is among the most quoted of Emerson's poems; particularly the last stanza :—

> O, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
> I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome;
> And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
> Where the evening star so holy shines,
> I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
> At the sophist schools and the learned clan;
> For what are they all, in their high conceit,
> When man in the bush with God may meet?

Date and notes are needed also for the "Ode inscribed to W. H. Channing," which is a reply to those who wished Emerson to be more vigorous in his anti-slavery activities. He was on the right side, but was not very ardent about it. He had other slaves of his own to free, he said,—*viz.*, imprisoned thoughts. But he was vigorous enough and outspoken enough when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, making it felonious to harbour a runaway or to give him succour of any sort. Emerson said, in public, that this Act was "a law which every one of you will break on the earliest occasion; a law which no man can abet or obey without forfeiting the name of a gentleman."[1] But this

[1] ix., p. 428.

Ode to Channing is unintelligible without knowledge of contemporary history :—

> Though loath to grieve
> The evil time's sole patriot,
> I cannot leave
> My honied thought
> For the priest's cant,
> Of statesman's rant.
>
> If I refuse
> My study for their politique,
> Which at the best is trick,
> The angry Muse
> Puts confusion in my brain.

The most striking bit in this poem is that in which he deplores the modern materialism which makes man a slave to outward success and possessions :—

> 'Tis the day of the chattel,
> Web to weave, and corn to grind ;
> Things are in the saddle,
> And ride mankind.

Indeed it is mostly in scattered bits throughout Emerson's poetry that he appeals to us. The level of excellence is not maintained. There is much originally-worded but vague and difficult matter, and now and then a flash of pithy expression which impresses the reader's mind permanently, as in the triplet asserting compensation for all losses :—

> Heartily know,
> When half-gods go,
> The gods arrive.[1]

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[1] ix., p. 92. ("Give all to Love.")

The last two lines are used, as the reader will remember, in Kipling's allegory, *The Children of the Zodiac,* which the poem probably suggested.

Emerson's treatment of love—the stock theme of the poets of all time—is somewhat disappointing, no doubt, to many an ardent youth and maiden. It is much too Platonic, in the true sense of that much-abused word. For Emerson the love of the sexes is initial, and "symbolizes at a distance the passion of the soul for that immense lake of beauty it exists to seek. . . Body cannot teach wisdom ;—God only."[1] In human love there is "smoke in the flame" ; in the higher love, for which human love is a training, selfish preferences vanish, love of humanity and of God swallows up individual littleness.[2] No doubt it is good religious philosophy, but, for the present, we are only men and women, not angels, and the Emersonian atmosphere is too tenuous for most human lovers to breathe in. It makes us long for a descent to the good brown earth and warm human flesh, even at the risk of Whitmanic cataloguing of an unnecessarily long list of our visceral and other arrangements.

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[1] ix., p. 437.
[2] *ibid.*, p. 103. (*Initial, Dæmonic and Celestial Love.*)

CHAPTER IX.

Personal Character.

Emerson himself deprecates any dwelling on the individual except in so far as he illustrates principles; and he would certainly protest as vigorously as did Paul and Barnabas at Lystra against any attribution of divine or heroic qualities. But the fact remains, and cannot fail to be observed, that Emerson's personal character was of so high an order that we inevitably feel almost as the Lystrans did. Contemplating such exceptional beings, we feel that the gods have descended in the likeness of men. About Emerson there was something un-humanly good and great. It was not merely his perfect citizenship, sonship, fatherhood, though in these common relationships his exceptionality already shows. As boy and young man, he had never given a moment's uneasiness to those who loved him, save in the matter of his delicate health;[1] while, later on, as father, his children could find no words wherewith adequately to describe him. Their recollections depict him as the ideal of wisdom, thoughtfulness, and gentleness.[2] There

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[1] Garnett's *Life of Emerson*, p. 44.
[2] *ibid.*, p. 111.

seems to be no record of any unworthy action or speech in his larger social duties as a citizen. If he was ever angry, it was in a righteous cause, as when he smashed the scurrilous notice-board which defamed a worthy fellow-townsman; and we are reminded of One who made a whip of fine cords, and used it on those who similarly dishonoured what should have been respected. Throughout, Emerson's life has a superhuman air about it: the more one studies it, resolutely visualising the man, the more vividly this is perceived. He seems like a strayed spirit, descended here by mistake on his way to a nobler planet. Or perhaps not by mistake but of set purpose, seeing man's need of such a teacher. Wise, good, full of perception of beauty—not one of the tribe of saints who exhibit a morbid onesidedness, but a rounded complete man, wholesome and sound, through and through—serene, unshakable, not "*tourmenté des choses divines*" but living habitually with them, as one contentedly at home;—seeing the man thus, it is not wonderful that he should appear superhuman. The wonder is that he has not been deified and made the centre of a cultus, long ago, particularly as his personal appearance aided the effect of his life and writings. Tall, slightly stooping, spare, clean-shaven, strong-featured, yet with a kindly smile ("a sunbeam in his face," says Hawthorne) to offset his rather stern mouth, his aspect was that of a prophet. His eyes, in particular, had something unusual about them, quite apart from their intense blue; for it is observable in some of his portraits. One writer says that they gave the impression of seeing something that was invisible to others. An old

lady told the present writer, in 1899, that when she heard Emerson lecture in Manchester in 1847, she had the curious feeling that his eyes saw "through the walls, and out into infinite space," and this was still the most vivid part of her recollection of the event, after half-a-century. But his whole personality was unusual. That indefinable quality known as personal magnetism or charm, was his in remarkable measure. Even Harriet Martineau, positivist and anti-mystic, said there was a nobleness and sweetness about him which moved people to their very depths, without their being able to explain why.[1] Froude remarked on his facial likeness to Newman,[2] which indeed is very marked; but the American's expression has a sweetness which the Cardinal's lacked. In spite of reserve and aloofness, Emerson's benevolent soul shone through his face for all to see. In his presence, an inexplicable serenity diffused itself,—a quiet joy, and an exaltation of spirit. People felt that it was good to be there. Even if he said nothing, his benign personality spread its influence around.[3] Perhaps it was the completeness of his love for fellow-mortals. "Let our affection flow out to our fellows; it would operate in a day the greatest of all revolutions." And no man ever practised his own precept more than Emerson. Perhaps his beautiful soul was the cause of his

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[1] Garnett's *Life of Emerson*, p. 144.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 145.

[3] "No one meeting Emerson was ever the same again. His natural force was so resistless and so imperceptible that it commanded men before they were aware." Woodbury's *Talks with Emerson*, p. 75.

attractive physical presence; for Spenser teaches the doctrine, in a verse which was a favourite with Emerson himself:—

> So every spirit, as it is more pure,
> And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
> So it the fairer body doth procure
> To habit in, and it more fairly dight,
> With cheerful grace and amiable sight.
> For, of the soul, the body form doth take,
> For soul is form, and doth the body make.[1]

On the merely moral side, goodness seemed a predictable probability, if there is anything in heredity: his father was a minister, like most of his more remote male ancestors, and we remember how, after the father's death, the widow took in boarders and did most of the household work herself, to provide a good education for the boys. But Emerson's character was somehow almost more than good: certainly more than good in the conventional use of that word. There was no trace of *conscious virtue* about him. "Each man sees over his own experience a certain stain of error, whilst that of other men looks fair and ideal." (*Love.*) Again we are reminded of One who said: "Why callest thou Me good?" Emerson had indeed a warm corner in his heart for publicans and sinners: the Universe has produced them, so why should he be finicky about accepting them:—

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[1] *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, xix. Quoted in Emerson's essay *The Poet*, iii., p. 14.

Nature, as we know her, is no saint. The lights of the church, the ascetics, Gentoos and corn-eaters, she does not distinguish by any favour. She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law; do not come out of the Sunday School, nor weigh their food, nor punctually keep the commandments.[1]

He had love for all. He would have suffered even fools gladly, if at the same time he could have done his own work. He had no academic snobbishness, and often spoke slightingly of merely intellectual qualities, regarding them indeed—as Goethe does in *Faust*—as the Devil. Affection blends, intellect disjoins.[2] Character outshines intellect. In Goethe's correspondence with the Duke of Weimar, the latter shows to most advantage.[3]

Nor was his virtue of anæmic type. Prophets, philosophers, and saints are usually deficient in a sense of humour, and Emerson was here perhaps at his weakest, as is shown by his dislike of Aristophanes, Cervantes, and Dickens; but he was nevertheless not quite without the saving grace. Though he had a delicate taste for fun, and preferred Lord Chesterfield—who claimed that he had never disgraced himself by laughter since his arrival at maturity—to Carlyle the Teufelsdröckian laugher, he could joke occasionally, even if with some difficulty.[4] And sometimes he got very near

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[1] iii., p. 64. (*Experience.*)
[2] ix., p. 407. (*Notes.*)
[3] viii., p. 317. (*Greatness.*)
[4] Woodbury says he never heard him laugh. *Talks with Emerson*, p. 126.

executing a stroke of real humour, such as would have delighted Carlyle himself. Once, when he had delivered his lecture on "The Method of Nature," the chairman—a Baptist minister—prayed that the audience "might be preserved from ever again hearing such transcendental nonsense." Emerson asked the man's name, and remarked: "He seems a very conscientious, plain-spoken man."[1] On another occasion he did a rather un-Emersonian thing in introducing deliberate bathos, for the sheer fun of it: "If we could only make up our minds always to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . . . (the audience waited eagerly for the culminating phrase) to what embarrassing situations it would give rise!"[2] The audience responded with Homeric laughter.

He could poke fun at the unco' guid, too, in spite of his clerical ancestry, and was quite capable of suggesting that they were an unpractical, feckless lot, totally lacking in business qualities,—but sharp enough to employ those who had them :—

> Philanthropic and religious bodies do not commonly make their executive officers out of saints. The communities hitherto founded by socialists—the Jesuits, the Port-Royalists, the American communities at New Harmony, at Brook Farm, at Zoar, are only possible by installing Judas as steward. . . Of the Shaker society it was formerly a sort of proverb in the country that they always sent the devil to market.[3]

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[1] Garnett's *Life of Emerson*, p. 125.
[2] xii., p. 464. (Notes to *Art and Criticism*.)
[3] vi., p. 66. (*Power*.)

There were Shaker settlements at Harvard and Sterling, near Concord, and Emerson maintained quite friendly relations with them; but he once said that he thought he saw this utterance of his reflected on the faces of some of the worthy elders he met in the cars.

At one period Emerson had an uneasy feeling that he was not treating his servants as he ought. Recognising the universal sonship of mankind, and moreover imbued with true American democracy in its best meanings, he decided that his servants should be invited to have their meals with the family. This patriarchal system was thereupon tried: but it did not work. The cook said she was not fit to appear at table, and the housemaid was too shy to appear without the cook. So the old system was reverted to, no doubt to the relief of the master, whose conscience was thus eased without damage to his fastidious taste in manners, which the cook and housemaid might have found it hard to satisfy.[1]

One of the pleasantest features of Emerson's life was his friendship with Carlyle and the way in which it was conducted, They saw each other in 1833, 1847-8, and 1873, but except for these occasions their communication was by letter. And Emerson had plenty of opportunity to cultivate forbearance and the returning of a soft answer, for his stormy friend did not boil his critical peas before shooting them :—

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[1] i., p. 440.

How you go on as if altogether on the 'Oversoul,' the Ideal, the Perfect or Universal and Eternal in this life of ours; and take so little heed of the frightful quantities of friction and perverse impediments there everywhere are. . .[1]

But Emerson acted on his own precept that people ought always to be taken by their best handles, and accordingly ignored Carlyle's faults and prejudices, including even his defence of slavery, which must have been very distasteful to the American. He saw the essential *genuineness* of his friend, saw that he spoke out his thought, and "never feared the face of man"; and this great fact overshadowed errors of opinion. He edited Carlyle's earlier works in America, contributing prefaces and making himself to a large extent financially responsible. *Sartor* and *Chartism* at first sold slowly, and Emerson found himself out of pocket to the extent of a thousand dollars,—a serious amount for him, as he remarks in his Journal. It is almost certain that Carlyle never knew how much his friend had done for him. Eventually the Scotsman's work obtained the recognition it deserved—earlier indeed in America than at home—and all was well. But there had been risk, which Emerson shouldered, saying nothing.

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[1] vii., p. 345. (Notes to *Society and Solitude*.) In another letter, referring to the *Dial*, Carlyle says: "You seem to me in danger of dividing yourselves from the Fact of this present Universe, in which alone, ugly as it is, can I find any anchorage, and soaring away after Ideas, Beliefs, Revelations, and such like—into perilous altitudes, as I think; beyond the curve of perpetual frost, for one thing." Holmes's *Life*, p. 162.

It has sometimes been suggested that Emerson was lacking on the side of the warm human affections, and extracts from his essays may easily be gathered in support of the charge. There is a passage in *Experience* which seems to indicate a callousness or numbness or anæsthesia, chilling and repellent to many readers :—

> In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me . . . something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me and leaves no scar.[1]

But he is here speaking of the immortal hunger of the soul for more and more experience, for closer and still closer touch with reality, and is describing how at present everything strikes us only a glancing blow, even our griefs : we look forward to death with a grim satisfaction,—" there at least is reality that will not dodge us." Most people know the mood : a sense of unreality, as if we half suspected that it is all a dream, from which we shall presently awake. But it is clear from Emerson's Journal and from a letter to Carlyle, that the loss of this noble boy—the little Waldo, dead of scarlet fever at five years of age—was as stunning a blow to him as it would have been to any human father. The pathetic heart-cry which it wrung from him reminds us of the similar case of another great soul of very different temperament,—Huxley, who lost a child

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[1] iii., pp. 48, 49.

of about the same age, by the same disease. Also, Emerson's habitual reserve prevented him from public expressions of emotion over personal matters. In the Journal whence the just-quoted passage was taken, it stands: "the death of my sweet Boy," which he evidently thought too intimately revealing, and perhaps verging on the sentimental. But in the letter to Carlyle he drops all reserve :—

My son, a perfect little boy of five years and three months, has ended his earthly life. . . A few weeks ago I accounted myself a very rich man, and now the poorest of all . . . you can never know how much of me such a young child can take away . . . a promise like that Boy's I shall never see. How often I have pleased myself that one day I should send to you this Morning Star of mine, and stay at home so gladly behind such a representative. I dare not fathom the Invisible and Untold to inquire what relations to my Departed ones I yet sustain.[1]

The poem *Threnody* is his dirge for this "wondrous boy." Holmes says it has the dignity of *Lycidas* without its cold classicism, and the tenderness of Cowper in the lines on his mother's picture.[2] This is perhaps an over-estimation, but no doubt the good doctor was too much moved by his very human sympathy to exercise his critical faculty impartially. The poem is a deeply poignant expression of grief, too sincere and spontaneous to be analysed and judged in detail. As a whole it does not reach the distinction of some of the other

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[1] ix., p. 453. (Notes to *Threnody*.)
[2] *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 333.

pieces, such as *Days*, *Brahma*, and *The Problem*. But it does show that Emerson had a human heart. And his human love was not confined to the fatherly. After his first wife's death, and until his departure for Europe, he daily visited her grave ; and in his Journal there was found an entry indicating grief and passion such as perhaps few have known, for it appeared that on one occasion he had opened her coffin in order to look once more on that beloved face.

Dr. Holmes, in his *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, quotes the remarks of several personal friends of Emerson's, as to his character and personality. An old schoolmate, Rufus Dawes, speaks of him as " a spiritual-looking boy in blue nankeen, who seems to be about ten years old,—whose image more than any other is still deeply stamped upon my mind, as I then saw him and loved him, I knew not why, and thought him so angelic and remarkable " (p. 44). Judge Abbot refers to the " peculiar look in his eyes, as if he saw something beyond what seemed to be in the field of vision " (p. 50). James Russell Lowell, then Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and thus meeting the most distinguished men then living, wrote to Holmes : " There was a majesty about him beyond all other men I have known, and he habitually dwelt in that ampler and diviner air to which most of us, if ever, only rise in spurts " (p. 361), and—says Holmes, " our good Methodist, Father Taylor, spoke of him as more like Christ than any man he had known " (p. 412).[1]

[1] Quoted from the *Life of Father Taylor :* letter from Mrs. H. Mann to Taylor's daughter.

Holmes says of him somewhere that he was "sane for an idealist." We may similarly say that he was remarkably reliable in small practical matters, for a mystic. We usually expect little derelictions, say in the matter of punctuality in keeping appointments, from lofty geniuses whose thoughts are not running on mundane clocks. But Mr. Woodbury says that he never knew Emerson a minute late at any appointment.[1]

The same authority settles another vexed question. A story often turns up about Carlyle and Emerson (sometimes it is Carlyle and Tennyson) sitting smoking a whole evening without speaking: Carlyle finally remarking, while knocking out the ashes of his last pipeful, that they had had "a fine time." Such a feat of silence would of course have been quite impossible to Carlyle; and the smoking would have been almost equally impossible to Emerson; for he did not smoke at all until he was fifty—which was after his two visits to Carlyle—and even then he had only two cigars a day, each after a meal.

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[1] *Talks with Emerson*, p. 129.

CHAPTER X.

Emerson as Critic:

English Traits and Representative Men.

It is usual to regard Emerson as a dreamer, or at best as a scholar and philosopher of very unpractical character. But he could unmistakably walk the solid earth when necessary, and could come to close grips with facts. On one occasion a Concord publican or his emissaries had put up a scurrilous sign in the middle of the village, defaming the excellent Dr. Bartlett, the leading physician, who had been active in the temperance cause. The people laughed or were angry, according to their opinions and temperament, but did not touch it. Emerson came along on his way to the post-office: stopped to read the notice, and forthwith smashed it down with his walking-stick.[1] And he could be equally practical in his criticism of other things. He could observe closely and comment acutely. In his *English Traits* he gives us the best criticism ever written, of English customs, ways of thinking, and general character. Carlyle called it the best

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[1] vi., p. 357. (Notes to *Power*.)

book he had read for seven years,—worth all the other books ever written by New England upon the Old.

It follows from Emerson's conception of the soul as greater than its possible expression, that persons are always disappointing. Men descend to meet. Language cannot convey the fulness of thought and experience; least of all the unpondered language of conversation. It might therefore have been expected that Emerson, knowing this, would have discounted his anticipations, thus saving himself the shock of discovering that his heroes and oracles were only human beings, after all. But apparently he did not quite succeed in doing so, for his meetings with distinguished men always resulted in more or less disappointment, even in the case of Channing. Sometimes it was his sense of humour that got the better of him, the idol showing itself in undress, so to speak, and appearing rather ridiculous; as when the old man Wordsworth proceeded to chant his own poetry to his visitor. Sometimes it was the downright ill-manners of the great man, as in the incident with Coleridge, already described. (Also Coleridge "took snuff freely," and soiled his cravat and suit.) But generally it was the inevitable fact that a writer puts his best into his books, and therefore appears comparatively commonplace in his conversation. Emerson knew this was true of himself, but did not sufficiently remember it as regards others. Moreover his acquaintance had been with giants of English literature, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Gibbon and Macaulay; and he had a naturally exaggerated idea of the great living Englishmen he was going to see, particularly

on his first visit in 1833. After the second visit, in 1847-8, he had adjusted himself to the facts and had touched English life not only at its summits but also on its more average levels, by meeting many men besides the great writers; and he was then able to write the acute yet very favourable criticisms which he gave in lectures on his return to America, and afterwards in book form under the title *English Traits*. He realises the impossibility of a really impartial and aloof judgment, for "England has inoculated all nations with her civilization, intelligence, and tastes;" and a critic becomes her relative and advocate—or rebounds to the spiteful enmity of inter-family feud—instead of maintaining judicial balance. However, he will do his best.

England's climate has a singular perfection. Neither hot nor cold, there is no hour in the year when one cannot work. The only drawback is the darkness of its sky. Night and day are too nearly of a colour. It strains the eyes to read and write. An Englishman said to the Persian Ambassador: "I am told that in your country you worship the sun." "So would you, if you ever saw him," replied the Persian. The population is "twenty-seven millions, but emigration is going on (1852) at the rate of a thousand a day," and it remains to be seen if the country can stand the drain.

The best nations are those most widely related. The English are an example. "Everything English is a fusion of distant and antagonistic elements." The language is mixed—half Latin and half Gothic. The blood is mixed, dark Kelt, fair Saxon and Scandinavian, of temperament conservative and

progressive respectively. The animal vigour comes from the fair stock :—

> These Northmen are excellent persons in the main, with good sense, steadiness, wise speech and prompt action. But they have a singular turn for homicide; their chief end of man is to murder or to be murdered; oars, scythes, harpoons, crowbars, peat-knives and hay-forks are tools valued by them all the more for their charming aptitude for assassinations. A pair of kings, after dinner, will divert themselves by thrusting each his sword through the other's body, as did Yngve and Alf. Another pair ride out on a morning for a frolic, and finding no weapon near, will take the bits out of their horses' mouths and crush each other's heads with them, as did Alric and Eric. The sight of a tent cord or a cloak-string puts them on hanging somebody, a wife, or a husband, or, best of all, a king. If a farmer has so much as a hay-fork, he sticks it into a King Dag.[1]

But these honest fellows degenerated in Normandy, and the twenty thousand thieves who landed at Hastings in 1066 had lost their language and acquired all the Gallic vices instead. Such however is the glamour of antiquity and wealth that "decent and dignified men now existing boast their descent from these filthy thieves." Emerson is rather too hard on William and his crew. They brought necessary ingredients for the mixture, after all.

The Englishman has vigour and endurance: other countrymen look slight and undersized beside him, and invalids. He is bigger than the American,

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[1] v., p. 58. (*English Traits : Race.*)

is, in fact, a little overloaded with flesh. He is logical, but "impatient of genius, or of minds addicted to contemplation." He looks always to facts, tests all by results. He has justice in his blood: is not touchy on a point of honour or easily seduced by a title or a phrase, but will at once fight to the last drop of blood if you attack his property or his freedom. He uses plain language, means what he says, says what he means and no more, disdains embroidery and flights. "I find the Englishman to be him of all men who stands firmest in his shoes."[1]

He is cleanly, methodical, loving conventional ways: a stickler for form. Fond of his home, which he decorates with pictures and plate if he can afford it. "Domesticity is the taproot which enables the nation to branch wide and high. The motive and end of their trade and empire is to guard the independence and privacy of their homes." Here are the finest women in the world.

The Englishman has the Teutonic hereditary rectitude, further cultivated by the punctuality and precise dealing which commerce requires. His power rests largely on his sincerity. Geoffrey of Monmouth says of Aurelius the uncle of Arthur, that "above all things he hated a lie." The English of all classes pride themselves on this veracity: the French, they say, are more polite than true.

But the Englishman has a constitutional dulness and lethargy. He is slow in the uptak'. "A saving stupidity masks and protects their perception, as

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[1] v., p. 102. (*English Traits: Manners.*)

the curtain of the eagle's eye."[1] Coleridge is said to have given public thanks to God, at the close of a lecture, that He had defended him from being able to utter a single sentence in the French language. An English lady on the Rhine heard some Germans allude to her party as foreigners. "No," she said, "we are English; it is you who are foreigners."

Coupled with stupidity and arrogance is the Englishman's hypocrisy in matters of religion. Abhorring change, he clings to the last rag of form, and is dreadfully given to cant. "The English (and I wish it were confined to them, but 'tis a taint in the Anglo-Saxon blood in both hemispheres),—the English and the Americans cant beyond all other nations. The French relinquish all that industry to them. What is so odious as the polite bows to God, in our books and newspapers?" When the Englishman prays, so far is he from attaching any meaning to the words, that he thinks he has done quite the generous thing, and that it is rather a condescension on his part to pray to God.

It is well that Emerson included Americans in this condemnation, for an amusing example occurred in his own experience. Visiting California in 1874 with friends, he read in San Francisco the lecture now printed as "Immortality." Next day the *Alta California* produced in all innocence a gem of the first water :—

All left the church feeling that an elegant tribute

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[1] v., p. 138. (*Character.*)

had been paid to the creative genius of the Great First Cause, and that a masterly use of the English language had contributed to that end.[1]

Emerson's comments on this are not on record. What would Carlyle have said?

The Anglican Church suffered some gentle but keenly searching raillery at the hands of this acute visitor. It (the Church in question) is marked by good sense and mildness: is perfectly well-bred and can shut its eyes on all proper occasions. Its gospel is: By taste are ye saved. If you let it alone, it will let you alone. But its instinct is hostile to all change. It has not been the founder of the London University, the Mechanics' Institutes, and whatever aims at diffusion of knowledge. The prelates are overpaid. A bishop is only a surpliced merchant. A wealth like that of Durham makes almost a premium on felony. The bishop is elected by the Dean and Prebends of the cathedral. The Sovereign sends these gentlemen a *congé d'élire*, or leave to elect, but also sends them the name of the person they are to elect. They go into the cathedral, chant and pray and invoke the Holy Ghost to assist them in their choice; and invariably find that the dictates of the Holy Ghost agree with the recommendations of the Sovereign.

The English Church, undermined by the scholars' criticism, has nothing left but tradition, and is led logically back to Rome. Its infallible Book turns out fallible, and it has no authority save that

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[1] Garnett's *Life of Emerson*, p. 180.

derived from historical continuity. And it is now clear that the Reformers of the sixteenth century sawed off the branch on which they sat. An Anglican bishop, reading fatal interrogation in your eye, has no resource but to ask you to take wine with him: and "when the hierarchy is afraid of science and education, afraid of piety, afraid of tradition and afraid of theology, there is nothing left but to quit a church which is no longer one." And the sects are no better; they are only "perpetuations of some private man's dissent."

And yet, England is religious. If religion be the doing of all good, and for its sake the suffering of all evil, *souffrir de tout le monde, et ne faire souffrir personne,* "that divine secret has existed in England from the days of Alfred to those of Romilly, of Clarkson and of Florence Nightingale, and in thousands who have no fame."

"I leave England," he wrote to Margaret Fuller, "with an increased respect for the Englishman. His stuff or substance seems to be the best of the world."[1]

The "Representative Men," on whom Emerson gave seven lectures before the Boston Lyceum, in 1845-6, and in England in 1847-8, publishing the series in 1850, are Plato, Shakespeare, Napoleon, Swedenborg, Montaigne, and Goethe. These represent respectively the philosopher, poet, man of the world, mystic, sceptic, and writer. It may be objected, not without reason, that Swedenborg is not a good representative of mysticism, St. Teresa

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[1] v., p. 323. (Notes.)

or Madame Guyon or Jacob Boehme or any of a dozen other Catholic saints being more typical of the high spiritual gifts involved; while Goethe seems unnecessary after Shakespeare. But Emerson was no doubt better acquainted with Swedenborg's life and thought than with those of the truer mystics; and he had toiled through fifty-five volumes of Goethe—learning the language as he went on—to please his friend Carlyle, and no doubt he felt that this labour ought to be made to pay dividends by means of a lecture. Also he had a certain personal interest in Goethe through his elder brother William. The latter, studying theology in Göttingen, and beset by doubts, made pilgrimage to Weimar, eighty miles away, for advice. Goethe advised the expedient, not the heroic; told him to continue in his profession, preach his best, and keep his doubts to himself. But the Emersons were not the people to practise insincerity. At twenty-four William Emerson changed his plans and went in for the law. Goethe's cynical advice must have jarred on Ralph Waldo's moral sense, and when he came to read *Wilhelm Meister* its free Continental manners would further offend his fastidious taste.

Carlyle said, after reading *Representative Men*, that he got the least good out of the Plato-part, for he remembered nothing of it except Socrates' clogs and big ears. This would not be pleasing to Emerson—Carlyle rarely tempered his criticism to the culprit—for Plato was his chief hero. Of all secular books, he says, Plato only is entitled to Omar's fanatical remark of the Koran: "Burn the libraries, for their value is in this book." He

is the mountain from which all later men have quarried their boulders. He unites the Unity of the religious East to the detail-seeking, analytical, scientific West, and thus balances for the first time in one soul the tendencies which sway in eternal conflict all down the ages, wherever lesser men have attempted universe-explanations. Plato could see both sides, could ride his pair with a foot on each, could keep his two balls always in the air. It is true that he has no self-consistent system of philosophy, that he says one thing in one place and the reverse in another, that "the acutest German, the lovingest disciple, could never tell what Platonism was;" but that very fact proves his greatness. He will not take sides and be partial. Like the Universe itself, he will not be afraid of contradictions.

Of Napoleon, the man of the world, it might be expected that Emerson would make no competent judge. Yet the expectation would be wrong. The philosopher estimates the man of action much better than the latter would have estimated the former. No doubt the scholar always feels more or less his parasitism, and Emerson often used to say: "I like people who can *do* things." Accordingly he gives ungrudging admiration to the power of the man Napoleon. This man would see no impediments to his will; would blot "impossible" out of the dictionary. "There shall be no Alps," he said,—and built his roads until Italy was as accessible as Paris. Having decided what he wanted to do, he did it with might and main. He fought sixty battles, and had the details all calculated out beforehand, winning his victories in his head before

he won them in the field. He had enormous powers of endurance: "there have been many working kings, from Ulysses to William of Orange, but none who accomplished a tithe of this man's performance." He had the efficient man's contempt for the ineffective; "the hereditary asses," he called the Bourbons. Nor was he soldier only. He delighted in the conversation of men of science, though slighting literature as mere phrase-making; and he discussed religion with the Bishop of Montpellier, showing New Theology tendencies concerning hell. But he was no materialist. "You may talk as long as you please, gentlemen, but who made all that?"—pointing to the stars. Naturally he had the defects of his temperament, the vices of his virtues. He had no generous sentiments. He was neither truthful nor honest. "He is a boundless liar." He had a passion for stage effect, was vulgar in manners, was an unqualified egotist. In short, he had no virtue save power; and in the exercise of that power he left France poorer and feebler and smaller than he found it. So inefficient, ultimately, is power without other virtues. The gods are going the other way. Napoleon was fond of talking about his star, but the one to which he hitched his wagon was a falling one and not one which travelled with the swinging constellations. As soon as he fought for conquest and personal ambition,—not for France and order and principle—the stars in their courses were against him, as they were against Sisera.

The lecture on Montaigne is perhaps the best of the series. Certainly it is the homeliest and most human. Emerson had early found a friend in

Montaigne—so much so that for some time he felt he would require no other book. It seemed to him that he must have written it himself, in a former life, "so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience." The circumstances of the two were widely different, for Montaigne was a French lord of the sixteenth century, bred a good Catholic, and a courtier and man of the world in his early days. But there was nevertheless deep communion between the two, a uniting catholicity of mind. Montaigne was honest, through and through: a lover of truth and hater of cant: outspoken and candid—perhaps too much so for some tastes: a solid, shrewd man, who has seen the foolishness of pretending to be more than we are, or to know more than we do know. Yet he was no materialist—he saw through that fallacy also:—

You are both in extremes, he says. You that will have all solid, and a world of pig-lead, deceive yourselves grossly. You believe yourselves rooted and grounded on adamant; and yet, if we uncover the last facts of our knowledge, you are spinning like bubbles in a river, you know not whither or whence, and you are bottomed and capped and wrapped in delusions. Neither will he be betrayed to a book, and wrapped in a gown. The studious class are their own victims; they are thin and pale, their feet are cold, their heads are hot, the night is without sleep. . . If you come near them and see what conceits they entertain,—they are abstractionists, and spend their days and nights in dreaming some dream. . . But I see plainly, he says, that I cannot see. I know that human strength is not in extremes, but in avoiding extremes. I, at least, will shun the weakness of philosophizing beyond my depth.

So the *seigneur* Michel de Montaigne, having retired from court life at thirty-eight, proceeds to live in quiet and homely fashion on his estate, writing down meanwhile the random thoughts that came into his head, on every topic under the sun. And the result is a book which the best minds have commended. It is the only book known to have been in Shakespeare's library. His autographed copy is in the British Museum ; and another copy of this translation (Florio's) has the autograph of Ben Jonson. Leigh Hunt says that Montaigne was the only writer that Byron could read with any pleasure. One wishes that Burton, of *Anatomy of Melancholy* fame, would have read him also. It would have cheered him up. And there is considerable similarity and kinship between their two minds, in the way they jog on through their reflections and quotations.

Emerson had a great regard for Swedenborg, though disliking his morbid visions and his stiff Old Testament theology. What he chiefly liked about him was his doctrine of Correspondences, according to which every material object has a spiritual meaning. It was Emerson's habit—as it was Plato's—to base his thought on perceptible nature, and then to use the natural object as a symbol for something in the thought-world ; somewhat as we all do when we say " as brave as a lion," " firm as a rock," " wise as the serpent," " meek as a lamb," etc. But Emerson saw the danger of tying the thought to one symbol only. The scientifically-trained and too systematic mind of the Swedish seer fell inevitably into this error. He made the horse stand for carnal understanding ;

a tree is perception ; the moon, faith ; a cat means this, an ostrich that, and cabbages something else, poorly tethering each symbol to one spiritual sense. But, says Emerson, the slippery Proteus is not so easily caught :—

> In Nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts. . . The central identity enables any one symbol to express successively all the qualities and shades of real being.

Nevertheless Swedenborg is a colossal soul, and may be called the last Father of the Church. His works run to about fifty stout octavos, and would be a sufficient library for a lonely and athletic student. He stands as a sort of companion and parallel to Shakespeare, as Emerson points out :—

> I have sometimes thought that he would render the greatest service to modern criticism, who should draw the line of relation that subsists between Shakespeare and Swedenborg. The human mind stands ever in perplexity, demanding intellect, demanding sanctity, impatient equally of each without the other. The reconciler has not yet appeared. If we tire of the saints, Shakespeare is our city of refuge. Yet the instincts presently teach that the problem of essence must take precedence of all others ;—the questions of Whence ? What ? and Whither ?

It is the ancient problem of the Good and the True, on which Coleridge was so fond of expatiating. And there is also the Beautiful. Man's soul is many-sided, and cannot be satisfied with one kind of food or activity.

CHAPTER XI.

Conclusion.

What, then, is the net upshot and purport of Emerson's life and work? Admittedly he reared no great Hegelian or Spencerian system of philosophy: he made no discovery in science, was no Copernicus or Darwin; and he did not even create any "immortal" poem of the Shakespearian or Miltonic kind. What, then, is his title to fame? What is the result of him? What did he *do?*

The thing is almost indefinable. It is only to be indicated by indirect approach from various sides. It is intensely real, but of the general and all-pervading reality of the ether of space, which, though one of the fundamental realities, is intangible, imperceptible.

First, he stands for an uncompromising sincerity, and somehow communicates it to his readers. He also heartens us with the required courage. Thoreau once said that God liked atheism better than fear; certainly Emerson liked honesty better than discipleship. And this means that he had conquered the most subtle temptation that can beset a man of his type. He was openly a teacher, and the teacher's natural tendency is to wish to be looked to for continual guidance. But Emerson

was too pure a soul to show the teacher's egotism. He wished to set others firm on their own feet. Mr. Woodbury tells us how, finding himself differing from his revered master, he went and stated his case. Emerson deliberated, then, with his bright and kindly look: "Well, I do not wish disciples." It was a shock, but a healthy one. It shook the pupil off from his support, but thereby he learned to walk alone.

Then, he impels to a finer life. He lifts us, by precept and example, above pettiness. Life becomes something that can be lived nobly—a thing worth doing—in any circumstances. The root of the matter is subjective, not objective; inner, not outer. It is a question of attitude, of orientation, not of performance, though that also is good. The fine things, the things worth having, can be had by anybody, and cannot be taken away. "There's sun and moon and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's also a wind on the heath," says Borrow's gipsy, and the thought is thoroughly Emersonian. Look high and wide, not down at the muck-rake. "Lift your aims," Miss Mary Emerson was continually saying to her nephews—and they followed her advice.

Stevenson says somewhere that a new doctrine is only another form of error, which in turn must make way for its Protean successors; but a spirit communicated is a lasting possession. Emerson gives us no new doctrine, but he communicates a spirit. Even in everyday matters of behaviour, his influence counts:—

Coolness and absence of heat and haste indicate fine

qualities. (A gentleman makes no noise; a lady is serene.[1])

And in the higher things he communicates a similar refinement,—a good word which has been somewhat spoilt by improper application to surface polish and mincing manners, but which in its real sense is peculiarly fitted to Emerson. [Truth, Beauty, and Good are his Trinity, each in its perfection including the three: the philosopher emphasizes the first, the poet and artist the second, the saint the third, but all are worshipful.]

Finally, Emerson strengthens Faith. He himself lived by faith, and his life is a vindication of the wisdom of the course. First, faith in the possibilities of knowledge. He welcomed all scientific advance. Fate is unpenetrated causes; it is the business of science to penetrate them. Second, faith in inspiration. The religion of his day in New England was polite, stately, and learned, but it stood for external knowledge and forms, not for internal inspiration. Emerson gave it new faith in the sources of power on which each individual may draw. His own faith in the right pivoting of his soul was supreme. If a man plant himself unreservedly on his intuitions, the huge world will come round to him. And, thirdly, even if it does not, all is still well. For, ultimately, Faith is the assurance that all is right, even though the seen and temporal seem to fight against that creed. Emerson pre-eminently had this faith. The universe is a clash of warring atoms and

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[1] iii., p. 137. (*Manners.*)

wills, but something is being achieved. We cannot see what it is, for we are parts, and cannot see the whole; but the One knoweth. We may safely trust ourselves to it—yield ourselves to the perfect Whole, as he sings in the poem *Each and All*. We are at home in the Universe, we are not foreigners or outlaws. God is our Father.

It was not a new gospel, but it was a needed re-affirmation of the old and true one which is continually being obscured and clouded over by man's lower activities. Emerson re-animated religion; brought man back to his God, or at least showed us once more the way of salvation, for us to take if we will.

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